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"HER EYES DILATED, AND WERE FIXED ON SOME DISTANT OBJECT."

Haunted Hearts; or, The Broken Betrothal.

BY RACHEL BERNHARDT.

CHAPTER I.

WAS IT A GHOST?

CHRISTMAS EVE! How many thoughts cluster round it! It is Christmas Eve when this story begins, so fraught with joy and sorrow to four young hearts.

At Larch Abbey, the grand, old, many-windowed building, with

the dark gray walls, standing in wide grounds, it is the habit to keep up the various old customs belonging to Christmastide.

The weather is seasonable, for it is clear and frosty, and there has been a heavy fall of snow on the previous day, so that to-night there is a magical world without, covered with soft foldings of purest white, which take fantastic shapes on the branches of the old trees in the pleasure grounds.

Over this cold and beautiful drapery of snow the moon throws down her fullest light—and moonlight and fresh-fallen snow are ghost-like, but indescribably beautiful.

Silence comes in to aid this enchantment, for there are no rough noises here, near this grand old Abbey, behind which spread wide majestic woods and far-stretching plains.

Silence—the solemnity of the moonlight and of the hour might

surely be enough to wake an imaginative heart to invest the silence with something of mystery.

That was what was said afterward by most of the good folks assembled that evening at Larch Abbey.

Old Deborah Cane did not say so, however, but then she was an antiquated dame, who had been nurse at the Abbey for years out of number; and who would listen seriously to what an old nurse believed?

Even beautiful Delia Larch smiled when Deborah grew solemn over her ghost stories.

Delia Larch is the heroine of this story, and never has she appeared more beautiful than now.

She is dressed in a robe of dark sweeping velvet, with only a little of richest, creamiest lace at the throat and wrists. A jewel gleams in her dusky hair; her dark lashes shade a fair cheek, tinted with health and beauty, and when she raises these lashes, her eyes laugh out their mirthful ess.

She holds in her hands a furred mantle, ready to throw over her when the rush of cold air shall be admitted as the hall door opens, for several of the guests who have formed that merry Christmas Eve party reside in the neighborhood, and are now going home.

And Delia has proposed, and all those who remain at the Abbey have readily agreed, to see the departing guests to their carriages.

They reach the hall; Delia's handsome brother Reginald, two or three years her senior, stands beside her.

Those two cling together lovingly, for rich as they are in this world's goods, they are poor in relatives—father, mother, and elder brother long since in the grave; and so Delia owns the Abbey and its lands, and Reginald is heir to a still larger property, called Mount's Castle; but the brother and sister live here at the Abbey together, and the wife of their deceased guardian, Mrs. Ashley, dwells with them. She is a kind old lady, and, fortunately for Delia, is fond of gaiety.

She stands here in the hall on this occasion to introduce Delia and her brother to our readers. There are many guests besides, among whom we may notice Lord Lindsay Deane and Miss E. Earle; he a young noble of ancient lineage, she a young lady of high position and much wealth.

In the background are several servants.

Twelve o'clock begins to strike with solemn distinctness, and really no one had any idea that it was nearly so late.

Lord Lindsay casts an appealing glance at Delia: does she perceive it? If so, she feigns to be busy with the departing guests.

But Reginald Larch has boldly taken his stand by Favoretta—or rather, has drawn her forward to his side; for are they not affianced lovers now? Did she not tell him yesterday (and I insist yesterday!) that she could return his love?

So Reginald draws Fay's hand within his own as midnight begins to chime.

The wide hall door swings softly open, and—what a sight presents itself!

Did ever snow wear such a garb of enchanting beauty under the cold, clear moonlight?

Nobly thought of the old.

"Good night! Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!" was said by all; and the carriages containing the departing visitors rolled away.

But I am wrong in saying that everybody amid that assemblage called out the good-night and the good wish; for Delia did not.

Instead thereof, she gave a cry, suppressed indeed, but it startled those near her; especially her eyes dilated, and were fixed on some object in a passing terror.

"What is it, D.?" asked Reginald, bending toward her.

"Didn't you see?" she said, softly and hurriedly. "Out there in the snow—that figure shrinking away! Oh, Reggy, you noticed his—his whole appearance?"

"No, I didn't; and I think you mistook the broad patch of light falling on that bush so heavily snow-laden, and the cedar bough above, for a man's figure," replied Reginald, in the same tone.

"Oh, no!" whispered Delia.

It was all she had time to say, for the house door closed.

Come back into the saloon, good people, for a few moments, that you may get warm again before retiring," cried Mrs. Ashley, leading the way.

And all followed except Delia, who lingered, and said to the old man-servant who had opened the door, "I wish I could look out once more!"

"Certainly, miss, if you wish it!" And then the cold air rushed in once again, and the wonderful world outside was disclosed to view.

Delia, unheeding the sharp air, stood full in the entrance, and gave one searching glance at the cedar bough and the shrub beneath it, and then signed to the servant to close the door. After which she became aware that Lord Lindsay Deane was lingering at a little distance, wistfully and timidly regarding her.

Delia looked up at him, and a blush stole over her fair face; but she laughed lightly.

"You have been taking another look at the enchanting Christmas Eve?" asked he, coming to her side.

"No; at nothing so romantic," she smiled.

"No? Let me ask, then, what was it you honored by your notice?"

"I was searching for the ghost, Lord Lindsay. It may be proper for the hour and time of year; but you will set me down as very silly and fanciful for doing so."

"I will help you look for the ghost myself!" said the young lord, warmly.

What else might he not have said if old Hart, the man-servant, had not been there in the background (respectfully lingering till he could pass—Delia and Lord Lindsay were standing in the archway of the inner hall) it is impossible to say.

Old Deborah, too, was waiting in the foreground, that she might exchange a "Good-night" with Miss Delia. Thus there was hardly an opportunity for love-making.

In reply to Lindsay's last speech, Delia said, more seriously, "It was not a ghost that I was seeking; but I do wish somebody had noticed it as well as I. It was a figure in a slouch hat, shrinking away among the trees."

"I'll go out and find him, if he is to be found!" And the young man would have seized his overcoat, and rushed out into the snow, had not Delia laid the tips of her fingers entreatingly on his arm.

"To-morrow! to-morrow! Oh, not to-night!" she cried.

"To-morrow will be too late," he answered.

"We can trace the foot-marks. Oh! please come now into the saloon with me," she urged.

He would have gone anywhere with her, and was easily persuaded.

When they returned to the lofty apartment, people were exchanging the final "Good-night" with each other.

As Lindsay clasped Delia's hand, he imprisoned it lingeringly.

"He loves me!" was the thought which thrilled through her heart. And a rosy future, all golden with hues of warmest affection, unrolled itself as by enchantment before her vision within.

Who could chide her? Could she foresee that the mysterious figure of which she had caught a fleeting glance that night—the dark figure in the slouch hat, hurrying away amid the snow-wreaths, carried with him her destiny?

The young girl ascended the staircase with Fay, her heart still beating to a rapturous tune with Lindsay's hand-pressure. As she reached her own apartment, her first action was to hurry to one of the windows, and to draw aside the curtains to gaze out upon the night.

Her windows overlooked the front of the Abbey, and if the reflection of the light streaming on the fantastic white folds of snow had really caused the appearance of a figure, she would like to feel assured if she had made a mistake.

But no! Broad and fair fell the moonlight over the particular shrub she had had in view when the house door was opened, and a dark cedar bough waved above it; but there was no resemblance now to the figure of a man in a slouch hat.

A tap at the door, and old Deborah entered.

"I could not go to rest to-night, Miss Delia, without coming to wish you joy for the Christmas-tide," said she.

"Come in, dear Deborah," cried Delia, drawing her old nurse to the fire. Then, to the sleepy maid who was awaiting her, "Marston, you need not stay a moment more. I shall wait on myself to-night."

And having dismissed her, Delia sat down on the thick hearth-rug at Deborah's feet.

"Did you hear me call out, Deborah?" said she, presently, when they had exchanged a few words.

"No, my dear Miss Delia; but I know'd there was somethin' amiss, 'cos I was watchin' you. And you looked startled, and whispered to Mr. Reggy, an' had the house door opened agen. Besides, I heerd you tell my Lord Lindsay as you'd seen a ghost. Which no doubt you did, my dear young lady."

"Oh, no, nurse! I am not so foolish as to think that. But I *did* see a figure in a slouch hat getting away as fast as he could out of sight under the cedar bough. And I wonder whom it could be!"

"I know!" answered the old woman, mysteriously, and with awe in her tone.

Delia looked at her searchingly.

"I've never said a word to you all these years, but to-night I seem as if I couldn't hold my tongue," continued Deborah. "Ah! poor dear Mr. James, dead in foreign lands so long ago! No wonder that on Christmas Eve his spirit should come to look at the place he never in life came back to! That was who you saw, Miss Delia; but I wish he could rest, poor Mr. James!"

"Nurse, dear," cried Delia, "don't talk like that! It pains me, even though I never knew—neither I nor Reggy—our eldest brother, James. His death was so sad, out in the wild prairies, away from every one at home; and so sudden, too, from the bite of a rattlesnake. Oh, if they had only had brandy enough with them, he might have been saved!"

"'Twas a sad death, my dear; but sadder still, to my mind, that he can't rest! For you may depend on it, there's no ghost but his wanders about the old Abbey! A slouch hat I well remember he used to wear. Don't talk of it to other people, dear Miss Delia, or the servants will take fright. Poor Mr. James would never hurt one of 'em; he was a bit extravagant, I don't deny; your papa paid his debts twice, and then he went to 'Merica. But he was a-comin' back all right when he died. Show me just now where you see him? Do, now, Miss Delia."

Delia drew her to the window, and indicated the precise spot where she had observed the figure, at the same time entreating her old nurse not to believe that any ghost could revisit this earth.

"And why not?" asked Deborah, confidently. (Delia's reasoning was all thrown away.)

"Well, well, I mustn't talk on, for 'tis late—a good hour into Christmas Day, so I must leave you to your rest, Miss Delia! But this I do want to say; speak to the shade of your dear brother, Mr. James, if so be he appears to you again. Maybe he wants to tell you somethin', or to unburden his mind."

"Dear Deborah, I wish you didn't believe in ghosts," said Delia. "But tell me, how old would my brother James be if he had lived till to-night? He was so much older than Reggy or myself."

"He'd 'a' been nigh upon forty. Well, he was always kind to his old nurse, that I know, if he was a bit extravagant, which I don't deny. Young men will be young men. Mr. Reggy's a wonder, so full o' spirits and up to everything, an' yet that steady! Well, good-night, Miss Delia, or I shall talk till dawn."

Delia returned her good-night kindly, and ere she laid her head on her pillow, once more drew aside her curtain, and gazed out on the enchanting prospect of snow, lighted by the rays of the moon.

What a start she gave as she gazed! Was it fancy, or was there actually the dim figure of a man, wearing a slouch hat, standing out there amid the snow-wreaths?

As she propounded this question to her own fast-beating heart, two o'clock tolled out upon the stillness of early morning.

CHAPTER II.

THE TAP AT THE WINDOW.

RETURNING daylight awakened Delia, and her first remembrance was connected with the occurrence of last night.

"At least," thought she, "I can trace the mark of footsteps in the snow, if a man really was there by the old cedar tree!"

But what was her disappointment to find that a thaw had set in, and that rain had been pouring down.

There was no chance now of seeing the mark of footsteps in the sodden snow.

"And so you saw a ghost last night, D.?" asked Reginald, jokingly, as he greeted his sister at breakfast.

"So says Deborah," she answered.

"You should have let me go and search for the apparition last night, Miss Larch," remarked Lord Lindsay, taking the place by her side. "Will you come and show me the exact spot where you discovered it? Then I shall know, in case you wish to send me after it on some other occasion."

"By all means; for it is not every one who would have the courage to pursue a ghost," laughed Delia.

"Then you will really come out and instruct me as to the whereabouts of the apparition?" pursued he.

Delia said "Yes," with a little blush, for her heart told her what his anxiety to encounter the ghost really meant. Was it not for the charm of being alone with her that he positioned in this earnest way that she should show him the exact spot near the cedar tree?

Of course this was patent to others as well as to Delia; but, as no one could see any reason why Lord Lindsay should not fall in love with her, nobody thought of checking their intercourse.

And so they went out together, though it threatened to rain, and the prospect out of doors was dim and gloomy.

But what was that to these light-hearted people? They were together, and to them the leaden sky looked bright.

Happy thoughts, brimful of bliss, were coursing through the young man's brain as he walked by Delia's side along the curving graveled pathway which led to the cedar tree. His hopes leaped up, and would not be repressed. Surely he might hope now? This sweet and most lovable girl would never deceive any man! And lately she had listened, not unwillingly, to his words, and her smiles and blushes came and went when he addressed her. Should he risk all on a word? How soon might he tell her—so far as speech could do that—how infinitely dear she was to him?

That was the thought in his heart as they went on toward the cedar tree.

"Here it was that I noticed the figure," said Delia, softly. "But now there are only patches of snow, so we cannot determine whether or no any one came here."

"Who says that?" cried Lord Lindsay, hastening forward, and picking up, near the side of the path, a handkerchief, not very noticeable, lying against a patch of melting snow.

"Here is a remnant of the apparition, I do believe!" exclaimed he. "Well, he has some taste; for this is white, and fine cambric. Now for the name of his ghostship."

Delia looked with some interest, as the letters "J. L." were found embroidered in a corner of the handkerchief.

"I must show this to my old nurse, Deborah, who really believes I saw a spirit last night," she said.

Just after this discovery, down came the rain, and our young couple hurried to the carriages which were to take the party to church this Christmas morning.

The day flew by on light wings; for youth and health, and love sped the hours quickly.

On the morrow, the large and merry assemblage at the Abbey discussed, with much animation, some amateur theatricals shortly to be performed there, in which Delia was to sustain one of the principal characters.

"I hope you'll be ready for the rehearsal, Delia," said her brother. "We're all waiting for you; and I don't believe you've learnt a word of your part."

It was too true; and Delia declared that she would shut herself up immediately in the library, and make up for past shortcomings.

"Now, nobody come near me for a whole hour. Leave me undisturbed, and I will forget everything but my part," said she, gayly.

Lord Lindsay opened the door for her exit, saying, in a very low tone, "Remember me a little, even though you are determined to forget us all just now."

She made as though she heard nothing; but her heart beat fast as she entered the library. And she did remember Lord Lindsay, his last words and for the first few minutes chasing away all attention to the part she had to learn.

But she must compel herself to get the lines by rote, else what would Reggy say? So she sat down resolutely, and fixed her eyes upon the page.

For some short time all was quiet in the handsome apartment, and only the sighing of the winter wind made itself heard.

But suddenly the quiet was disturbed by a noise against one of the long windows, which opened onto the pleasure-grounds—a noise, it might be, of a swaying bough against the pane, or a signal from some person outside.

Delia looked up hastily.

It was yet early, not much past five o'clock, and the shutters in the library were not yet closed.

She approached the window at which the sound was heard, and listened intently, impressed with the idea that somebody was there; while the remembrance of last night's adven-

ture, and of the handkerchief found the morning before, immediately rushed into her mind.

But she could distinguish no noise of footsteps amid the sighing of the wind, and returned to her book with redoubled attention.

Then, once more the tap at the window was repeated—distinct and louder than at first.

Delia tried to persuade herself that it was occasioned by the swaying of a bough; but she was pretty sure that no branch had ever reached that window before.

Determined to pay no further attention, she read on. But again the persistent summons roused her.

It was in vain she essayed to learn her part perfectly, and rising, softly, she unfastened, with a good deal of noise, the long French window, and looked out into the darkness.

Gradually—for the moon struggled through clouds—the outlines of the wintry world without became visible; the dark belt of wood beyond the lawn, and the nearer shrubs and trees.

"If any one taps again, I shall now be able to detect it!" thought Delia, watching, instead of learning her part.

But no summons was repeated, and Delia, a little ashamed of having thought seriously of a noise outside the window on a winter night, resolved to say nothing of the tap on the glass.

"Time is up, Delia," said Reginald, peeping in, laughingly, about ten minutes afterward.

"And I am coming, Reggy. I have done pretty well," answered she.

"That's all right, then. Do come back with me to the drawing-room now, or we shall have Lindsay doing something desperate. He has done nothing but fidget and look wretched ever since you left the room."

"Pray do not be absurd, Reggy!" said Delia, reprovingly. "It cannot matter to Lord Lindsay whether I am in the room or out of it."

This young lady was not well pleased to have her love-affairs hinted at, when they were, as yet, in this undeclared state. Her life's happiness depended on being assured of Lindsay's love; but she was ready to feign profound indifference, even to her darling brother, till what she hoped was made certainty by Lindsay's own words.

"Oh, very well! Then I've neither eyes nor ears," laughed Reggy. "But, come along!"

How often she looked back to these last happy hours, this last happy evening, in the sorrow which rapidly overwhelmed her; the delightful talk with Lord Lindsay, the cheerful group of friends, the merry evening, the gay dinner, during which she sat by Lindsay's side, and he whispered soft nothings which conveyed so much to her.

And once, looking up, she caught a glance of radiant happiness from Fay's blue eyes, and knew that her joy was caused by Reggy's deep affection.

When—so few hours later—it lay with her to save that happiness from ruin, Delia remembered that glance, and resolved that she would suffer alone, that Fay and Reggy should not be separated because she herself must mourn.

Fonder than ever was the hand-clasp Lord Lindsay gave to Delia that evening, as they said good-night.

She was still dreaming of it as she went into her own pretty room.

Her sweet musing was interrupted by the voice of Deborah.

"I made bold to wait here for you, Miss Delia," said she, "for I'd somethin' to ask you."

"Certainly! Sit down, dear nurse," said Delia.

Deborah sat down, nothing loth; but her face was sad, and she was paler than usual.

"Miss Delia," said she, "I wanted to ask you if 'twas true what I heard them say in the servants' hall this evening, that you'd found a handkerchief near the spot where the appearance came last night but one ago?"

"How could I forget to tell you?" cried Delia. "Yes, nurse, dear, I did find a handkerchief. We were passing it round at luncheon to find an owner for it, so then I suppose the servants heard what had happened."

"That's just it, my dear miss! And you'll let me see it, won't you?"

"That you shall, nurse; and I am so glad to prove to you that it was really no ghost that I saw that night."

"I'm not so sure of that!" murmured Deborah.

But Delia did not hear the old woman's remark; she had risen to fetch the handkerchief.

"Here it is," said the young lady, returning.

Deborah seized the piece of cambric; her fingers trembled, and she eagerly searched for the mark in the corner.

It was easily found—J. L., embroidered.

Deborah continued to gaze on the letters so long, that, at length, Delia broke the silence with the remark she had made so lately.

"You see now, dear nurse, that it could not have been a ghost that I saw."

"Oh, Miss Delia!" exclaimed Deborah, getting up in great agitation. "Oh, Miss Delia!—it's very awesome to my mind! You mind, J. L. were his initials—your brother James's—him you never saw! And this may be for a token, who's to tell?"

"My dear Deborah," urged Delia, amazed at her old nurse's credulity, "surely you will not let an accidental coincidence like this make you believe that there was any connection between my poor brother, so long since dead, and the handkerchief found yesterday morning? Don't you see that it must have belonged to somebody whose names begin with the letters J. L.? And who ever heard of a ghost carrying about a cambric handkerchief, very nicely marked, certainly?"

"Don't joke, Miss Delia. I know it does seem ridiculous to you; but still it may be for a token!"

"Give me a kiss and go to bed, dear nurse," said Delia.

And Deborah sighed, and left the young lady to repose.

When she was quite alone, when her maid had closed the door for the night, and the wind, roaring without, only made the contrast to her cosy room more pleasant, Delia drew aside her curtains, and took a long look from the window.

She smiled at herself as she did so; but in the moonlight, which now reigned supreme, no figure in a slouched hat was visible.

"I must have been mistaken! Only how did the handkerchief get there?"

With this careless question she dismissed the inquiry, and sunk to rest with thoughts of Lindsay.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECOND TAP AT THE WINDOW.

DUSK is creeping again next afternoon over the silent world, and once more Delia sits in the handsome library at the Abbey, learning her part in the play.

Many joyous hours have intervened since this time yesterday; many a tender glance and word from Lindsay have penetrated the young girl's heart.

More than ever is she assured that he loves her.

Yes, assured; such tones, such softly-breathed words, could have but one meaning.

No trouble of heart mingles with this blissful thought; but she half murmurs to herself: "We shall be as happy as Fay and Reggy."

The proposed rehearsal had been postponed for a day or two, as Delia is obliged to confess "that she is afraid she is not perfect in her part."

"I'll shut you up till you do learn it, D.," says Reginald, laughingly.

Delia, repentant, promises everything.

And now she sits, as dusk is falling, in the library, occupied in the same way as she was about this hour yesterday.

It is a little earlier, it is true, and the gloom without is weird and melancholy.

Do her thoughts wander from the page before her to the tap which came so lately to the window?

Unconsciously, perhaps; for when a footman enters to shut out the night, Delia looks up and desires him to leave one shutter unfastened.

He wonders why, but obeys.

She has succeeded in committing two pages of her part to memory, and has forgotten the interruption which troubled her yesterday, when, all at once, when most unexpected, the tap at the window is repeated.

An imperative, and yet an uncertain summons; and Delia, half-frightened, glances at the window, herself unseen.

But from her seat she can distinguish nothing.

The blackness of night reigns without, made more intense by the brightness within.

"It is absurd to let such a small thing interrupt me," thought Delia, going on with her task, when "Tap, tap, tap!" sounded with solemn distinctness on the window-pane.

"I will discover the cause," thought she; and noiselessly left her cosy seat by the fire, and stationed herself close to the casement. There she stood, listening for the expected sound. And it returned, "Rap, rap!" against the window.

By one swift movement, Delia appeared suddenly close to the glass, but started back with a smothered exclamation; for there, unmistakably, was the same figure she had seen on Christmas Eve, amid the snow!

It did not now retreat into the darkness, but pressed close to the casement, making a mute appeal. Despair seemed impressed on its whole bearing, and this mingling of entreaty and despair chained Delia to the spot immovable. It was but a brief moment which passed thus; then, as she would have fled away to summon Reginald, the figure held up to view a large letter, deposited it outside the casement, and vanished from sight.

The curiosity of Delia was excited to the highest pitch. By nature she was brave rather than timid, and the mystery of the affair altogether urged her to see what the letter contained.

The figure had vanished into the darkness, but the white envelope was distinct enough against the glass.

The window opened easily from within, though it was secure from entrance without. Delia put up her small white hand, slipped the bolt, and in one short instant—almost before she had time to feel the keen rush of cold air—had picked up the envelope and closed the glass door.

How strange an adventure? Would Reggy say she had better not have taken in the letter? She must get hold of him before dinner, and they would talk it over together.

The young girl hurried to her seat by the fire, and broke the seal, noting, as she did so, that the writing was bold and firm, and that the letter was addressed to herself. One short moment more, and, pale and changed, she hurried to her room to read it alone.

And as she fled, she felt as if haunted by a strange dream, an unreality which clung to her.

Sinking onto a couch in her dressing-room, she unfolded the paper. It began, "My dear Delia," and continued thus:

"Let me entreat you to peruse this letter alone, and to carry your thoughts back to the fact that there was a time when a brother you never knew kissed you—an unconscious baby of a year old—and left his old home to battle with life in a foreign land. Delia, my almost unknown sister, I am that brother, so long supposed to have died among the prairies of North America. The world believes me dead; and, my sister, it must think so—I dare not deceive it. We will keep this secret between us; for why should I burden my young and happy brother with the knowledge of my existence?"

"Ah, no! I will leave to you and to him my wide inheritance, content to live in obscurity, to live broken-hearted, as I have merited.

"And why do I deserve this fate? Because—to you I must tell the undisguised truth, Delia—because I have forfeited my position in the world; I have placed myself, in a moment of wild frenzy, within reach of the law, and to proclaim my existence would be to set the officers of justice after me.

"You are so young that my childhood was passed ere you were born. Thus you know nothing of my father's severity, nor of my own hot temperament. I was born with this unhappy disposition, Delia, and circumstances made it worse. I fell among wild companions, who led me into debt. No wonder my father was angry, for my two years of college life fell heavily enough upon him. I gave wine-parties; betted; gambled; I ordered expensive luxuries without consideration of their cost. My father was not then so wealthy as he became afterward; but any fortune would have been squandered at the rate I was living. But he paid my debts, and received my solemn assurance of amendment. And, Delia, I meant to keep faith with him; but was so easily led astray—fool that I was!"

"Why prolong the story? It will be enough if you are told the result of my mad conduct. After a year's misery, my father learned the truth—that I was as heavily in debt as before. Can you wonder that, though he again discharged my liabilities, he would no longer believe my promises of reform? Delia, he was obliged to act as he did—for at that time the Abbey was under repair, and he did not then own Mount's Castle, nor was it certain that he would ever become the owner of so large a property. And so, as I had ruined my career in England, and spent a fortune, he proposed that I should go abroad for some years on a small fixed allowance, and try my abilities in America.

"I was willing enough to go; it gave change and excitement. Can you credit, Delia, that before I landed I had gambled away all my ready money? You were a year old when I started. I will not tell you the many scrapes I got into; they were wild, but not unpardonable for the first few years. I liked the keen air of the Rocky Mountains, the excitement of the hunting expeditions on the prairies. My father remitted my allowance of three hundred a year regularly; but you will understand that three hundred a year was nothing to a man who had spent three thousand in a few weeks.

"Well, of course, I was always in debt. I gambled, and was often successful; I speculated in cattle, and reaped some profit—all at haphazard.

"One day, when I had been nine years in the far

West (my father had assured me that he could with difficulty retrieve his position in a dozen years, so much had my extravagance impoverished him), I joined another man in a hunting expedition. His surname happened to be the same as my own—Larch. He was a saving fellow, crafty and business-like—very different to me. I saw that if I could join him in a speculation, I should make money rapidly. The only thing was, I had not the sum necessary to pay down.

"To be brief over this painful part of my story, Delia, I forged a check on a fellow I knew, intending to pay the money back. The latter and myself had been close friends; but when he discovered the cheat I had practiced on him, his anger knew no bounds. He pursued me into the prairie—I believing myself secure.

"Well, it so chanced that the poor fellow I had started with was bitten by a rattlesnake, and as we had not brandy enough to dose him with, he died in a few hours. Two or three others were with us—hired men. I had hired them; but they knew nothing of me.

"In my wild career I had done a kind action now and then, when the fancy took me; and I had lately saved a man from disgrace by payment of a small sum. It was he who found me just in time to warn me of my former friend's pursuing vengeance. In a twinkling I had arranged escape. I abandoned the hunting expedition, settled with the fellows I had hired, telling them that as poor Larch was dead, I had no heart to go on—knowing well that they would meet my pursuer and tell their tale.

"And so he believed me dead. But he had his revenge, though unconscious of it; for he knew all about my connections in England, knew everything concerning me, and would have rejoiced to expose me had I been alive. He would do so now if he could trace me; and he is a middle-aged man, well and prosperous. Now do you see, Delia, why I have been silent during the eight years which have elapsed since this happened? No, not quite yet; for you can never understand the deep horror I felt when I considered of what I had been guilty. I was a forger, and judged myself unworthy of inheriting my father's name and place. I said to myself, 'Let my brother take my position. The world supposes me dead; let me accept that as true. My family shall feel no more disgrace from me.'

"But still another motive kept me silent, Delia. That very night, when I thus managed to spread a report of my own death, in seeking to evade a fellow who knew me, and to whom I owed money—that very night I got into a quarrel with him, and—in self-defense, I solemnly assure you, Delia—stabbed him; not so deeply as to cause his death, I hope devoutly, I think, I believe not; but of this I am uncertain.

"I fled; changed my name; took to farming, and prospered for a time. And I meant—I solemnly assure you this, my sister—I meant to die silently, nor ever to burden you—oh, you, least of all—with the secret of my existence.

"But a time came when I fell ill—very ill; and when I recovered, I had to recognize the fact that I must live with impaired health henceforward. The people who employed me were always asking if I had no friends in England who would help me. And then I thought that, in return for the inheritance I willingly forfeit (have I not said how unworthy I judge myself to possess it?), you would secure to me some fixed and modest pittance out of the thousands you possess. Five hundred a year would make me not only independent, but give me comforts in my declining years. I am forty now, and feel that I shall not long be a burden to you.

"But I am in sore want of every necessary. I have borrowed for my passage to England. Can you at once let me have a hundred pounds, Delia?"

"I cannot think that you will refuse, for that would be to let me die of starvation, or else to goad me into declaring my identity—in which case the law would lay hold of me; or there is still a last way of escape for those who have neither money nor friends—viz., to destroy myself. Shall it be so, Delia, or will you come to my rescue, like an angel of mercy?"

"If you will be such to me, give me your answer to-morrow evening at dusk, outside the library window I know so well. Your despairing brother,

"JAMES LARCH."

The letter fell from the hands of the fainting Delia. It was well that she was quite alone, that no one came to intrude on her solitude just then, or her secret must have been known—the dreadful secret which was none of her making.

After a time, she roused herself suddenly. A sort of desperation seized the girl. It seemed to her that if she did not keep up the appearance that all was well with her just now, Reginald's happiness must be forfeited forever. But if she could be strong, just for a little while; if she could laugh while her very soul was rent with a thousand agonies; if she could be brave enough to utter a few gay words, and go out and in among them all—then, it seemed to her, that out of the frightful wreck of her own happiness she might save Reggy's. He could be happy with Fay—he who would wed her in innocent ignorance of the blot on the honor of their name; but she herself could accept the hand of no honorable man—she who was now aware that she had a dishonored brother. Was he worse even than dishonored? Had he taken a man's life? Not with premeditation, perhaps, but in hot anger, through wrong-doing? Oh,

horrible! Was it for the sister of such a man to wed Lindsay Deane? Never! never! It would break her heart to speak the word which would separate her from Lindsay; but honor, good faith to him she loved so well, bound her by every tie to do so. After that she could leave the Abbey; could die quietly in some solitude abroad, and people would only say that she had fallen into ill health.

"Oh!" she cried, starting up as she thought this; "oh! can this dreadful thing be true?"

And all at once she said to herself that it might not be true—she would not give entire credence to so wild a tale till she had proof of it. But yet, in her inmost soul, she felt it must be true. It tallied with some things she had heard spoken of her elder brother. Tales of his wild extravagance, of their father being obliged to send him abroad, had reached her, as well as the story of his death from the bite of a rattlesnake. But still she said to herself that she would demand further proofs.

Giddy and trembling, she remained in her own room till her maid came to dress her for dinner, and she descended to the large circle of guests below only at the last moment.

Reginald met her with a reproachful inquiry as she entered, "Where have you hidden yourself so long? And our play, when is that to come off?"

"I was not well, Reggy, dear," she whispered; and her troubled looks bore out her words. "Some one else must take my part in the theatricals. I should keep you all waiting too long for me. Hush! don't make a fuss about it! Mrs. Ashley is moving to go down to dinner."

All through the evening which followed, Delia felt in a strange, unreal existence. Lord Lindsay glanced at her with infinite concern. Where were her enchanting smiles, her lively talk—above all, that look of happy mirthfulness that is so beautiful to see? In place of all this, pain, combined with high resolve, sat now on her youthful features; and once or twice he caught the glint of tears under her long lashes.

What did it mean? Was she in any trouble? If that were so, how could her brother, Reginald Larch, be so gay and unconcerned?

"Will you forgive me for asking if there is anything which has distressed you to-night?" asked Lindsay, in low tones, taking the vacant seat by her side.

"What should trouble me, Lord Lindsay?" said she, lightly, as she turned away.

But her lip quivered as she spoke, and her aspect stirred a tumult of unrest in his heart, as she began to turn over some photographs on a table near, without even seeing them, so greatly had her sorrow absorbed her.

A little later in the evening, feeling it impossible to bear up any longer, she slipped away from the gay group in the saloon, and reached her own chamber. But she did not stay there long; she passed out of it again, and down a long corridor, through a swing door, which shut off rooms which had once formed the nursery suit of rooms at the Abbey.

Old Deborah still occupied two of them, and here Delia could be pretty sure of finding her at this hour on a winter evening.

"Eh, dear! is it you, Miss Delia?" cried Deborah, as the young girl entered. "I am honored to see you here when all the gay visitors want you down below."

"I am not well to-night, dear nurse; and have come for a little talk with you."

"You're more than welcome, dear Miss Delia. Is there anything now that I can do for you?"

"Yes; talk to me about my brother James who went abroad, and died there. You remember him well, don't you?"

"I nursed him as a baby; 'tisn't like as I should forget him, Miss Delia. He was tall and broad-shouldered—a fine-looking gentleman when he left us all. Ah, dear! money's the root of all evil, and it was on account of that he had to go, my dear."

"How so, nurse? Do you mean that he spent too much? I have heard aunt Mary say that he did. But I don't exactly understand why he had to stay so long away."

"Poor Mr. James was extravagant—awful extravagant; and got so much in debt that for a time he nearly ruined your poor papa. He had to put down his carriages and sell his horses, and it was a great grief to your dear mamma. She died three years after Mr. James went to America, Miss Delia, and so was spared the sorrow of hearin' about his death out alone in the far wilds. Ah, poor Mr. James! The news of his death didn't reach the Abbey for months after it took place; but, naturally, when he didn't write to acknowledge the money your papa sent him, and no letters came for so

long, then inquiry was made, and that was how your poor papa found out that, without a doubt, he'd died hunting on the prairies. He'd spoken in his last letter about this hunting expedition, and said about how long he'd meant to be gone afore he went back to any town, and mentioned a person he knew well. And so, through that letter, master traced what had happened. An' 'twas put in all the papers how that Mr. James had died from the bite of a snake—a rattlesnake 'twas that killed him."

Delia's heart beat painfully. Everything Deborah said agreed with the fatal letter which had reached her in so mysterious a manner, and which had uprooted all her innocent joy.

She did not ask many more questions, but sat with her head on Deborah's lap as she had so often done when a little child. She seemed frozen with horror at the dreadful knowledge which had come to her.

When she arose to say good-night, Deborah was alarmed at the sorrow on her face.

"I mustn't talk about poor Mr. James again, my dear Miss Delia, that's plain. It has made you ill, I declare!"

When Delia reached her own room, she made haste to shroud her despair in darkness and silence. But she could not sleep; and when all the large household was at rest, she arose, lighted her candles, and sat down to her writing-table, as the clock boomed three.

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNKNOWN BROTHER.

WHAT was she writing there? Her unsteady fingers could hardly trace the words, but she had decided what must be done, and she did it.

"If it be really so," she wrote—"if you are actually my brother, I will not refuse to do a sister's part, even though we are strangers, and must remain so. Give me proofs of what you advance, and when I come of age, and have money in my own control, a thousand a year shall be secured to you for life. More should be yours if I could give it, and still avoid the discovery you dread. To me wealth is all but useless, for I shall pass the remainder of my life in solitude if you can satisfy me of the truth of your identity with my supposed dead brother. Till I come of age, I can but divide with you my allowance."

"With this I enclose five pounds. Let me find your proofs to-morrow evening at the window where you placed the letter I have from you, and you shall have fifty pounds at once. D. L."

And with this effort the sweetness of life went out for the fair Delia. Lindsay loved her, and she was bound by her very love for him to reject his affection. Lindsay loved her, and she would have to speak the words which would send him from her!

When morning dawned, of all that large household of which she was mistress, Delia alone arose with an aching heart, weak and ill with the shock she had received, but yet resolved to make an effort to join the party at breakfast, and she hoped to make the plea of headache account for her altered looks.

And she was successful, save where Lord Lindsay was concerned; for what can deceive a lover's eye? No headache could make the sweet face of his beloved one wear such a look of sadness; of that he was assured.

And there was a moment after breakfast, as the group around the well-spread board was dispersing, when she met Lindsay's glance fixed on her with anxious affection. What was it brought such an added touch of pain to her brow as she turned away?

"Shall you venture to walk to-day? Would not the air do you good?" said he, as he observed her about to leave the breakfast-room.

"I think not," she answered, with assumed carelessness.

"Not one turn in the grounds? Let me persuade you to try the remedy, and honor me by taking me for your escort," urged he.

But Delia had done with that loved companionship now. No more sauntering by his side, as she had done but two short mornings ago. Now all was changed for her, and she lived in a world with a black shadow over it, into which no man or woman must look. Let her, then, be careful not to drag Lindsay Deane into it with her.

She left him, then, with another courteous refusal, and again he noticed with extreme concern the anguish she sought to conceal.

And so, while Reginald and Fay went off together on horseback this sunny winter morning, which melted the last remnant of snow in the most sheltered places, Delia remained alone in her room, frozen, despairing.

Lindsay, as unhappy as herself, though in a different way, wandered in and out of the

house, counting the hours as they went by till he should again see Delia.

At luncheon she did not appear. Mrs. Ashley said she was keeping quiet to be quite well by the evening. Would she be quite well by that time? thought Lindsay—the look of pain gone from that sweet brow, and the old careless serenity reigning in its place?

All the long day went by for him without Delia. Reginald went to see her, and so did Fay and Mrs. Ashley; but she sent them all away, saying quiet was all she wanted. They did not seem alarmed about her. "She would join them at dinner," they said. And with that seemed satisfied.

In the afternoon, as dusk crept on, Delia left the shelter of her room, and went softly down the wide staircase. She could hear the click of billiard balls. That was well. The gentlemen were doubtless in the billiard-room, the ladies in the saloon. She should, then, find the library untenanted, and be able to deposit her letter outside the window.

Yes; her conjecture was correct. The lofty apartment was glowing with firelight, and a single taper burned on a distant table, but no one was there.

With rapid step she crossed the room, unfastened the shutter, unclosed the window, and shaking from head to foot, gave her letter to the mercy of the night winds.

Was it carried away? Was he, the unknown brother, watching for it in the darkness? Suppose that other hands than his found that letter!

She had shut the casement, but remained watching—watching.

Not for long, though. A figure moved on the other side of the long glass door, stooped, rose up again, and was gone—the figure of a man in a slouch hat.

Delia shuddered, and essayed to close the shutter she had unbarred.

But that was too much for her feeble strength, now that she was trembling with dread and fear. Again and again she made the effort, however, for she did not wish to be asked to account for having unfastened the shutter.

In her haste she let slip the heavy bar; the noise made by this prevented her hearing the opening of the door; and she started with surprise and apprehension as Lord Lindsay's voice addressed her:

"Let me close that shutter for you, pray, Miss Larch! How pleased I am to see you!—to have the hope of your joining us this evening. I little thought to find you when I came in here."

He had spoken with the glad surprise he felt at this unexpected *rencontre* with his beloved, and his joy gave place to uneasy astonishment as he observed how disconcerted she was at his presence.

Why did she tremble? Why did she shrink from him? She looked as if she had been startled, interrupted in something she would fain hide.

But he quickly told himself that all she did was fair and good, and could not be otherwise.

"Were you looking out at the night?" continued he, smiling down upon her. "Shall I open the window for you again?"

"No, no!" cried she, quickly, shrinking back, and her voice full of fear. "I mean," she added, striving to resume her ordinary manner and tone, "that I won't go on looking at the sky."

"Did you see the sunset?" asked he, coming close to her side, hoping to detain her if but a few moments. It was so sweet to him to be thus alone with her. Oh, that he dared feel that *this* was the propitious moment to tell her of his love!

"The sunset?" said she. "Surely there was no sunset to notice to-night?"

"Yes, such a remarkable one. Miss Earle meant to make you look at the sky."

"Ah, yes—I remember now!" exclaimed Delia, hastily and confusedly, with the air of one who strives to recall a forgotten circumstance. In truth, the trouble pressing upon her had chased small occurrences away.

Lord Lindsay could not help saying to himself, "What is it that absorbs her, and why was she so troubled at my appearance just now?"

But the affection he had for her overpowered those minor questionings, and he said, in a tone low and lover-like, "I had so looked forward to to-day—to the happiness of spending some of it with you! And it has been so long, for I have counted the hours as they went by, because your society was denied me! Are you really better now? Were you going to rest here till dinner-time?"

"I—I wandered down here for a little change," stammered she. "I will go and find Fay. But I will not talk much now, or I shall be stupid instead of agreeable this evening."

"Never aught but agreeable to me!" breathed he, softly.

And he had already imprisoned her fingers in his own—how unnaturally cold they were!—when the sound of voices, the opening of the door, the entrance of Mrs. Ashley and Fay, interrupted him.

"Since I dare not accept the love I feel that he would offer if I permitted him, let me avoid the dreadful pain of having to reject him in so many words," thought the unhappy girl. "I will spare him the mortification; I will spare myself the task which would be too great for me; I will avoid him, and he will understand. It is but for a few days more!"

Several times that evening, as Lord Lindsay sat by her side, did he detect the large tears well to her eyes—tears which she forced back. Once, indeed, the effort was too great for her; she had to rise hurriedly on some pretense to conceal the telltale anguish in her face. But a moment after she turned, and faced the assembled party with some gay remark, and no one detected her sorrow but he who watched her so lovingly.

"She is grieving about something—something she is trying to conceal! Oh, that she would let me share her unhappiness, and take all her cares upon me!"

And then it was natural that he should ask himself what secret cause of trouble she could have. She, the heiress of Larch Abbey, with the whole world at her feet! Who approached her without deference or affection? No one.

Mrs. Ashley petted, her brother adored her; all the good gifts of life were hers! But to Lindsay Deane it was but too patent that there was a secret sorrow cankering her life, and what it might be, deeply concerned him to discover.

But Delia gave him no chance of that. She was surrounded by a laughing group all the evening, and the next morning drove out with Mrs. Ashley; while, after luncheon, she disappeared altogether.

Where were those happy moments, once so frequent, when his love for her was dawning in sweetest hope? When she would linger willingly by his side, and shyly respond with smiles? Gone! Gone, almost as if they had never existed, save for the pained constraint she evidently experienced now, and the pang of sorrowful regret with which he remembered them. Would they return no more, or could they be wooed back?

That was what he asked himself with infinite solicitude as he walked about the grounds, restless and moody, in the afternoon.

And Delia? If Lindsay's unrest was sore, how much more so was hers! The hours which rolled away, bringing the dusk, were to bring also the proofs of her eldest brother's existence, and in so doing give her the indirect evidence of his guilt—his unworthiness!

Suppose, too, the library should be tenanted, as was often the case toward evening? How should she possess herself of the letter which would, doubtless, be awaiting her outside the window?

This was an added subject of anxiety.

As soon as darkness came creeping over the January sky, she left her room, (in which she had remained the whole afternoon), and sought the library. But she had hardly entered it, when she became aware that Lord Lindsay, her brother Reginald, and one or two people besides, were chatting round the fire.

Immediately she retired; without being observed, as she imagined. But Lord Lindsay had seen her, and instantly followed into the hall, in the hope of exchanging one precious sentence with her; of getting some word, however scant, from her dear lips.

She did not perceive that he had followed her, and what was his surprise at seeing her go to the entrance hall, open the door (which was only locked), and pass out into the cold air!

Uncertain what to do, not daring to follow her, he stood irresolute; and, as he hesitated, asking himself what it meant, Delia returned, shivering, and as if suffering from suppressed excitement. It was plain, also, that she was greatly disconcerted at finding him awaiting her there. But she strove to speak lightly.

"When one has a stupid headache, a dose of fresh air sometimes does more good than anything else," said she, trying to smile—trying to prevent her agitation from betraying itself.

He was silent, for she spoke with a forced smile, an assumed calm.

"But perhaps it was unwise to go without any wrap, and so late," continued she. "However, it is but just five o'clock."

"Will you forgive me," said Lindsay, approaching her, and speaking with infinite affection in his voice, infinite tenderness looking out of his eyes—"will you forgive me if I ask to know what it is which troubles you—and—to share it?"

The avowal of the devotion he felt for her trembled on his lips; he longed to tell her that he was there thenceforth to take all her cares on himself, when she prevented his further speech.

"You are not to assume that I have troubles, Lord Lindsay, and I must not stay shivering here, or I shall soon have an undeniable trouble in the shape of a cold."

And she left him standing there, and ran upstairs. Left him with unspeakable anxiety and pain in his heart.

Delia carried with her even a deeper grief than his. She had rushed round at all hazards to the library window, and there had found the letter she sought. That was the weight she carried, and with it misery without end in this life.

She burst into uncontrollable tears when in the retirement of her own room; and as soon as she could still them, took out the fatal letter, or rather the packet, for such it was.

Bending down before the bright fire blazing in the polished grate, her shaking fingers separated the many letters in the parcel.

What were they? Oh, she discerned, easily! Full well she recognized the handwriting of a dear old aunt, now abroad for the winter. Here were many of her letters, sent years since, to her nephew James in America. She had always corresponded with him, and would remember him well. Here was proof, indeed!

But the letter from her outcast brother contained many proofs, for in it he alluded to much that it was impossible for any stranger to have known.

And there were letters from her father and his—Delia knew the writing well. Could she cherish a doubt any longer? Alas! she knew now that she could not.

The letter from her brother himself was as follows:

"If these inclosures are not conclusive proof, what other can I offer you? But can you doubt that I am indeed your brother, Delia?—errand, indeed, but suffering and repentant, and still your brother!"

"See me but once—I have no right to petition for more than one interview; and we can then arrange a way in which you may transmit to me money for my pressing wants. You must see that it is impossible we can correspond in this way. Any one may find our letters, or may see you or me at the library window, and then all sorts of surmises might arise, unpleasant to yourself. Let me persuade you, then, to grant me one interview—it is your own brother who implores it. To-morrow I will be in the deer-shed in the park, in the hope that you will come to me there, and in a few moments will do more toward arranging future matters than could many letters. I will be in the deer-shed at eleven o'clock."

"Oh, Delia! do not fail your wretched brother! And do one thing before you come to settle your last doubt as to my identity. There must surely be several of my letters to my father still in existence. Compare these with the writing in this note to you, and you will find the similarity, even though a broken wrist has disabled me from entirely preserving the firm hand I once wrote."

"Your troubled and unhappy brother,
JAMES LARCH."

The last hope was over for Delia.

Kneeling there in the firelight, with every luxury surrounding her, she felt the cold chill of actual despair.

"He has slain a man, perhaps! And is a forger!" she went on, murmuring to herself; "and I—I am his own sister! What right have such as I to the love of Lindsay Deane?"

Overwhelmed with grief, she knelt on, forgetting all the passing events of the hour.

Her maid's summons at the door first roused her.

"I knocked ten minutes ago, miss, but you did not hear; but it's just within a quarter of an hour of dinner, and I was afraid there would be no time to dress you."

Delia sat passive as her maid rearranged her hair.

That individual, after a short cough or two, ventured a remark.

"There's been great excitement in the servants' hall to-night, miss; and I've made bold to tell you, because of the handkerchief which was found, miss, and the figure you thought you saw on Christmas Eve."

Delia felt a chill run through her.

"What of that?" she asked, faintly.

"Why, miss, the under footman, John was going round with a message to the stables just

after dusk, and he'd nearly reached the back court, when all at once he saw a tall figure, as black as night, in a sort of wide-awake hat, glaring on him with a wild stare. John was that terrified, he'd no heart to seize him; and now some of the servants say 'tis a ghost, miss, and that 'twas well John left him alone."

Delia could speak no word in reply.

Her color came and went painfully.

"I'd no intention to frighten you, miss," said the maid, noticing her young lady's agitation.

"Does John believe it was a ghost he saw?" asked Delia, faintly.

"I'm not sure, miss," replied the maid.

Delia never knew how she got through that dreadful evening. If she had been hesitating about meeting her elder brother, this talk with the maid would have decided her to consent to the interview. He must not hover about the Abbey, and run the risk of detection. For what might not follow on detection? Trial for forgery! trial for a far worse crime! The thought was agonizing to dwell on!

When the morning dawned Delia had lived through ages of misery.

She had resolved to see her brother, to give him all the money she had by her, and to show him the necessity of fixing his residence far from his old home.

During breakfast she could barely respond to the remarks addressed to her; but she felt constrained to join the family circle at the morning meal, otherwise, if she pleaded illness and yet was seen leaving the house for a walk so early as some time before eleven o'clock, it would naturally awaken comment.

Reginald and Fay, both extremely happy, were arranging plans for the day; Mrs. Ashley reading her many letters; the rest of the visitors engaged in breakfast, newspapers and conversation, when Delia left the room for the dreaded interview in the deer-shed.

No one observed her quiet departure save Lord Lindsay: he was watching her with loving and despairing eyes.

CHAPTER V.

THE INTERVIEW.

SHE had put on a fur cloak and hat, and carried the fifty pounds she was to give her outcast brother. To do this she would have to go well-nigh penniless for the next three months; for, not being of age, she had as yet only her allowance of three hundred a year for dress and charities, her brother (on the decease of her late guardian) managing for her the funds of the Larch Abbey estate.

But Delia thought nothing of the money; even the dread of meeting her unknown and outcast relative was swallowed up in the absorbing desire that no one should see whither she went this morning.

Breathless and terrified, she passed down the sunny carriage drive, then made a curve out of sight of the house to enter the park. But this was a round which would consume at least thirty minutes, and it was now turned half-past ten.

In her alarmed state, eager to get the interview over, she left the broad drive, in order to walk across the thick, wet grass, which was so laden with moisture as to be nearly as watery as a river.

Delia hesitated one instant, then struck across the greensward.

A voice behind arrested her progress.

"Miss Larch, let me beg of you not to risk a cold. The grass has never been dry for the last two months."

It was Lord Lindsay who spoke, and now stood beside her. He was unprepared for the look of dismay—nay, more than that, the terror she betrayed.

She grew pale; trembled visibly: essayed to speak, and could not pronounce a word.

At last, forcing a smile, which nearly wrenched his heart in twain, she stammered out:

"I do not mind wet grass. I could not live in the country without crossing it every day."

"But such grass!" persisted he. "You must have wet feet already, no matter how thick your boots."

"Whoever heard of wet boots being hurtful while one is walking?" exclaimed Delia, with difficulty repressing a shiver of cold and pain.

"It is standing about in them which is dangerous, so I will go on quickly. Good-by for the present, Lord Lindsay. I am bound for a long walk."

In truth, she hardly knew what she was saying.

"If you are resolved to go on, let me at least have the—the happiness of accompanying you?" urged he, persuasively, adoringly.

"Certainly not," replied Delia, in despair. "I shall never get back if I stay talking here. Once more, good-by, Lord Lindsay."

And she walked on quickly.

"Stay!" he implored. "Miss Larch—Delia—spare me a few moments. You cannot guess how I have looked for a chance such as this—a few moments—to tell you something of which my heart is full."

"I can stay for nothing now," she faltered, with a wretched attempt to speak lightly, to seem at ease. "See! I am shivering; that is because I am standing in damp boots. So, now I am off, and forbid you to follow me."

And she left him, without looking back.

Lindsay Deane stirred not.

What could she mean? Why did she persist in leaving him? Why was she in such a tremor at meeting him there? And what madness led her to wade through the sopping grass, rank and thick enough to make any one avoid it?

She had forbidden him to follow, but he lingered still where she had left him, regardless of the cold.

Slowly, and with misery at heart, coupled with a vague uneasiness, he regained the pleasure-grounds, and then stood still again.

Suddenly, with a gesture of despair, he went out into the high road which skirted the grounds, and began to walk at a rapid pace. And as he went, his eyes turned restlessly in the direction of the park where Delia had left him.

All at once he caught sight of her again—at a good distance off, it is true; but he could plainly distinguish that it was she, and that she was hurrying along in a dip of the ground, quite off the path, where, at this season, the saturated grass must make walking a penance.

In amazement he checked his pace and watched her.

She went on swiftly in a straight course; then, abruptly turning at right angles, made for the deer-shed.

And now we will go back to Delia herself, whose excitement had become so great that she entered the rough shed as pale as a ghost, and could not control her sobs, while she shook from head to foot.

Her startled glance around met no one; but she had barely time to lean for support against the door, when a figure came slowly into view from the dim recesses of the shed.

A tall, well-made, muscular man, about forty years of age, broad-shouldered and dark, who had been handsome, but who now looked worn and tired—in all things answering the description of her elder brother.

"Delia!" said he, in a hollow voice, approaching her.

He did not put out his hand; he was sad, and his large, mournful eyes seemed to express, "Though I am your brother, I am unworthy to clasp your hand."

Delia's sobs became, for a moment, uncontrollable.

"Hush, my sister!" he breathed, softly. "For one moment let me call you so. Are we not to part forever again after this interview? Let me, then, ask you a few questions in this only chance which I can ever hope for of learning some things my heart yearns to know."

"Take this first!" were the words which broke from the agonized Delia. "There are fifty pounds. I shall be unable to let you have any more for three months; but then I will send you seventy."

"Oh, Delia! how good you are! You have saved me from despair!" said he, as he received the money.

She made a strong effort at self-control, and added:

"We may be interrupted; so we must settle first the most necessary things. You must decide on an address where remittances may reach you, and you must leave this neighborhood. The servants have seen you already. Happily, Deborah is credulous, and has a fixed idea that your spirit haunts the Abbey; but that will not save you from ultimate discovery. You must leave the place at once."

"Yes, yes; you are right, Delia!" he returned, mournfully. "And see—I have written here my assumed name—'Robert Roberts'—and the address of my present lodgings in the next village. But I have resolved to go to London, where I can best hide myself, and my woes and sins. Take this paper, my poor sister, and never, never may you know a suspicion of the agony which tears my soul as I stand here, an outcast, seeing my old dear home in the distance, which I dare never reënter; seeing you, my only sister, close to me, face to face, after such an absence, and yet not daring to give you one embrace."

Delia wept anew; but she did not respond to the affection his words implied.

She could feel nothing but terror and pity for this stranger-brother, whom she had never met before, and who had wrought them all so much woe.

"Will you not take this paper with my address, Delia?" asked he, presently.

She put out her hand; and, as their fingers met, she involuntarily shuddered.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "It is well we should not meet again; for it is too much for me, Delia, to witness your aversion. I have deserved it. I am far from denying that. But there are things very sharp to bear, even though well deserved. You will pass your life in ease, surrounded by friends and all that makes life bright, in the dear home from which I am banished. You are so well guarded from sorrow, that you can realize but a faint idea of what my lot is, and must be."

"Stay!" cried Delia, roused by the misery she was called to bear in silence through his reckless wrong doing. "Perhaps no one can do wrong without putting another to pain. I would not reproach you. I do recognize the misery of your lot; but have I nothing to bear? Did I not tell you that I should live in solitude if you proved your tale? Is it nothing, that I should have to renounce a happy love—a life with nothing to conceal? I love some one better than my life, and have made him wretched as myself. I renounce his affection. I shall live in continual sorrow, because I dare not let him marry me. How could I do so, now that our name is dishonored? And I must bear this sorrow in silence, and never speak of it. Is all this nothing?"

"Oh, Delia," he cried, "you must not do this thing! The world believes me dead. Have I not been buried virtually for eight years past? You must not do this thing!"

"It is done," she answered, more calmly. "But I have risked much in coming here—very much. Ask me anything you wish, as quickly as possible."

"Tell me, then, of the old place!" he cried. "Does my father's portrait still hang in the same room as when I was a boy? Is it in the library, opposite to the fireplace?"

Delia nodded assent.

"And does his favorite chair still stand by the old writing-table he had there?"

"Yes," she said, faintly.

"And the look of the rooms—has new furniture altered their aspect, or are they the same? Oh, Delia, is there no way in which I might gain one last look at the dear old place? Let me cross its sacred threshold once more."

"You ask what is beyond my power, beyond my strength," she murmured.

"My heart hungers to see it again," he said, pleadingly. "Think of some way, Delia, by which I may gain one fleeting sight of my own old home before I exile myself from it forever."

"It must be at your own risk, then," faltered Delia. "Oh, think of your life, which you would imperil if discovered, and do not ask this."

"Your exiled brother implores it—it is a last prayer!" urged he.

Poor Delia, reproaching herself for hardness of heart, faltered out that she could devise no plan unless she admitted him for a brief moment to the library while some amateur theatricals were going on.

"And now I must leave you," said she; "and this interview cannot be repeated. It shakes me too much to have to contrive how to hide my actions."

"Good-by, then, my sister. May blessings follow you all through your life for the mercy you have shown to your brother!"

"Good-by!" faltered she.

And then she left him, and retook her way homewards, feeling that she was indeed forever separated from Lindsay Deane.

CHAPTER VI.

MISJUDGED.

ALL through the long, damp grass went the unhappy girl, so early robbed of her youthful joy by the hand of him who should have been her protector. On she went, a tempest of grief in her young soul, unconscious that Lindsay's eyes were watching her movements.

Dared he meet her as she regained the Abbey gardens? For what reason could she have sought the deer-shed, wading through what was almost a river?

"Has she some pet animal there, which she went to see?" was his next thought, as his eyes wandered to the distant shed.

The next instant a dreadful chill seemed to take the life out of his heart, as he observed the figure of a man sink out of the rough shelter, and reach a slanting path which led him in an opposite direction to that pursued by Delia.

Was this why she betrayed such terror at meeting himself? Did she—oh, perish such a thought!—did she go to meet some secret, unacknowledged lover? Who was the man he had seen? He was at such a distance from the spot where Lindsay stood that it was impossible to determine whether he were a workman or a gentleman.

"After all, I may be accusing Delia, my own beloved Delia, wrongfully! The man may be a keeper—that, doubtless, must be the explanation! How could I torture myself and wrong my darling by such a suspicion as I harbored for a moment?"

He drew a deep breath of relief; the sky which had seemed black in his moment of despair once more assumed its natural hue, and his step grew lighter. "Only why, why did she betray such evident agitation at meeting me? Am I anything or nothing to her, who is all the world to me?"

He would not venture to intercept Delia as she regained the Abbey, but he watched her till the last flutter of her robe disappeared within the entrance.

Never had two hours appeared to him so unending as those which intervened between mid-day and two o'clock. He longed to see Delia again—would she appear at luncheon?

Yes, she came in with Fay. They were discussing the projected theatrical performance which was to come off to-morrow evening. Fay was to take the part once assigned to Delia, and both the girls were merry over it.

Could she still laugh? Desperation makes us ready to assume any disguise for our sorrow, and so Delia laughed. But as she sat opposite to Lord Lindsay, a swift pang smote his heart as he silently regarded her, there was such a pitiful expression of deep-seated pain on her young face as she relapsed for a few moments into silence.

When the party rose from table, Lord Lindsay ventured to say to Delia, aside, "You did not take cold, I hope, this morning?"

Delia answered, with a smile, "No; why should I? Fay, do come and tell Lord Lindsay that girls brought up in the country are not afraid to walk a little way on the grass even in winter-time!"

And then she drew Fay away with her, declaring that there was still much to arrange for the theatricals.

Lindsay was in despair. Must he leave the Abbey without declaring his love? Why, that was what he had chiefly come there for!

His father and all his family were aware of his affection for the beautiful heiress of Larch Abbey, and would be beyond measure delighted if he succeeded in his suit.

But success seemed as far off as ever from the young man. Nevertheless, he said to himself, as he tried to bear his disappointment with a manly front, that he would certainly declare his devotion to her in plain words to-morrow evening; for then he would surely find a moment to breathe that devotion in her ear, while the amateur performance was going on. Having formed which resolution, he tried to bring patience to his aid for the hours which intervened.

The whole afternoon was occupied with a rehearsal, and servants were coming and going in all directions; for the ball-room at the Abbey, which opened into a room used as a breakfast-room, was on this occasion to do duty as a theater, the numerous guests being seated as spectators in the smaller room.

Delia did not go out at all next day, nor was there a single moment when Lindsay could find her alone. She appeared entirely taken up with the coming amusement; but Lord Lindsay said to himself, with a cruel pang, that she was hiding some grief under her light words and her smiles.

The day wore on. Dinner was a full hour earlier than usual, to give time for the theatricals to commence at half-past eight.

Fay, who was to figure as a Greek princess, came down to dinner in costume, as did also the other ladies who were to take part in the acting; and there was much laughter and merry-making during the repast.

But there were two who sat among the carelessly merry party that evening whose hearts were torn with anxiety—Lindsay's, who opined that this time to-morrow he would know his fate; and Delia, who said to herself over and over again, "Oh, that it were over! How shall I bear it to the end?"

Lord Lindsay was to know his fate still sooner than he had counted on, and the end for the unhappy and innocent Delia was to come earlier than she had dreamed.

"Now I hope we shall all cover ourselves with applause," said Reginald, as they rose from table. "Fay, do you feel like royalty in your royal robes?"

Fay declared that she did, and that she should be most unwilling to descend to ordinary life again among ordinary mortals; and then went off in haste with her train of attendants.

And now the rumble of wheels was heard, and the people invited for the performance began to arrive.

Delia stood by Mrs. Ashley's side, and welcomed them as they came in, and smiled at each one, and spoke a gay word, and showed her visitors where they should sit; and not one of them guessed that she carried a load of pain almost too great for mortal to bear alone.

At length all the expected guests had arrived; the actors were all ready, the lamps were turned down to give a dim light—for the first scene was to be enacted in semi-darkness—and Delia could slip away unobserved.

So, at least, she believed. Now was the moment to admit her brother James. There would be no other opportunity for that hurried look at his old home for which he so earnestly implored.

She went softly and swiftly to the library, the door of which stood open. A fire burned dim in the grate, but gave plenty of light for her to open the window at which she had first found the fatal letter.

All were so occupied with the theatricals that no one would discover, in all probability, either her own brief absence, or her brother's hasty survey of the library.

When the second act began she would return to the room and close the window.

Yes; now was the time! And with more confidence and calmness than she deemed possible, she went upon her errand.

And Lord Lindsay, sitting there among the spectators, had likewise said to himself, "Now is my time!"

With a heart throbbing painfully, fear predominating over hope, he, too, left the gay throng silently.

For an instant he paused ere he pursued Delia—paused to recall a happier time, to give him courage to tell her of his love; a time when she willingly lingered by his side, instead of avoiding him; a time when he could not help noting that a sweet and timid happiness stole over her enchanting face at his presence. What had changed this? Well, he was to know that very soon.

So he told himself, as he passed down the corridor leading to the library.

She entered. Could anything be more propitious to his wishes?

"At last, I shall find her alone; at last, she will not, she cannot refuse me a moment to tell her of my affection!"

"Delia!"

Her sweet name was on his lips, as, treading softly, he entered the dimly-lighted room. But the word died away unspoken, and he stood breathless, speechless with immeasurable woe.

She had unbarred the shutter and turned the handle of the glass door. "Now—now!" he heard her say; and then a man appeared within the apartment.

Lord Lindsay had not intended to act the spy; he had only obeyed the impulse of his love in pausing a moment ere he crossed the room, and astonishment had done the rest. The little scene passed so rapidly, the heaven-born hopes in Lindsay's heart died out so instantaneously and so cruelly, that he had not the power to move before he knew all.

All? No!—that he did not know. What his eyes assured him of was that Delia—his Delia, whom he had worshiped, before whom his heart had bowed down as before a divinity—was meeting some one in secret. That must mean that this unknown lover (who but a lover could it be?) was unrecognized by her brother—by her friends. She was then, doubtless, about to make a secret marriage! He was nothing to her any more! But he loved Delia too truly not to make an effort to save her.

Stunned though he was by pain and grief, he retired as softly as he had entered; but it was impossible for him to rejoin the gay group he had left.

Going to his room he rung for his servant, and gave directions that his things should be packed, as he had to leave for home suddenly.

"There is a train a little before eleven o'clock, which we must catch, Jones. Manage to get

me a trap to take me to the station without interrupting the performance."

"Yes, my lord," returned Jones, grievously disappointed to be called away from the Abbey, where so much merry-making was going on.

Lindsay sat down and wrote two hasty notes to Mrs. Ashley and to Reginald Larch, making his excuses and his adieux, and expressing his regret at being suddenly called away—well knowing that they would each infer that he had proposed to Delia, and been rejected by her. And then he wrote a letter of another kind, to Delia herself. It was this:

"Forgive this earnest warning—this urgent appeal from one who loves you as disinterestedly as ever man loved woman.

"Delia! I think you have guessed my love, and once I dared to hope that I could have won you for my own. And now, when that hope is gone, I appeal to you by that love, which is stronger than my life, to pause—if you can yet pause—in the course which *must* lead to misery. Think, Delia, whether any honorable man would come stealing into the house unwelcomed by your brother and your friends! Your own sense of right will tell you it could not be!

"I had followed you to-night to the library with the determination to tell you in words what you must have divined long ago—that my heart was yours only, and forever; and then I saw that man whom you admitted.

"Oh, Delia! has he bound you by some promise you fear to break? If so, let me take the place of an elder brother, and arrange matters for you, if they are capable of being arranged. Let this lover of yours come into the light of day; poverty, or a humble position, are not insurmountable obstacles to true affection.

"You see I plead no longer for myself; let that give you courage to honor me with your confidence, and I will be your negotiator with your brother and with Mrs. Ashley. For you are not happy, Delia; let me then—now as a friend alone—let me strive to order things so that you may become so.

"I implore you to let me aid you, or else to confide in your brother. Yours devotedly,

"LINDSAY DEANE."

Such was the letter he left behind, and then he rose and summoned his servant. As he descended the stairs bursts of laughter smote his ear. The actors were receiving rounds of applause.

Delia, leaning against the doorway, caught sight of him as he passed through the hall; but made as though she observed him not.

And thus he left Larch Abbey, and the unhappy girl noted the noise of the wheels rolling from the door, and then dying away.

CHAPTER VII.

DELIA'S NEW GRIEF.

THE guests were all gone; the applause was all over; the banquet which followed the theatricals had been crowded with guests, and Lord Lindsay's absence was long unnoticed by any but Delia. And then Reginald's regret at his friend's sudden departure was freely expressed; but Mrs. Ashley was silent about it, for she inferred that Delia's rejection of his hand was the cause.

But gayety and regrets were alike over for that evening; midnight had long since tolled, and Delia's aching head and aching heart were in solitude, when there came a tap at her door. It was her maid, who reëntered with a note.

"Oh, if you please, miss, Lord Lindsay desired this note to be given you to-night."

Delia's pale face grew flushed with a rose tint as she received the letter. The door closed, she was again alone, and then she eagerly read Lindsay's words.

Let us not try to give an idea of the young girl's trouble of heart. To be suspected by Lindsay of being in danger of making a secret marriage was almost too dreadful to be borne. She seized a pen, and wrote:

"LARCH ABBEY, January —.

"DEAR LORD LINDSAY:

"I should be without feeling if I did not assure you in the most solemn manner that the danger you fear for me, and from which you would guard me, does not exist.

"Let me thank you for your kind words, and at the same time express my sincere regret that you should ever have suffered any unhappiness on my account; but as, unfortunately, this has been the case, we will not meet till we can do so on a merely friendly footing. Yours sincerely,

"DELIA LARCH."

How cold the words, while her heart was glowing with love for him! And he suspected her, Delia Larch, of having a clandestine lover!

Could Fate strike her a harder blow? She thought not; but she was mistaken. Fate and she had not fought out as yet their battle together.

When morning dawned she was wholly unable to leave her bed; but that excited no comment, the lateness of the hour when she had re-

tired after the theatricals being sufficient excuse for her non-appearance at breakfast.

And there she lay, hopeless, doing nothing—caring to do nothing.

But even for Delia there was something which demanded action, as she remembered presently. She must post her letter to Lord Lindsay herself; and she rose, and went out into the village, without telling any one her errand.

As she returned to the Abbey her misery seemed to press on her with new force; for Lindsay was gone, and though she was as much parted from him in reality yesterday as to-day, yet it was sweet to see him, and to know that he loved her.

And now he would learn to despise her! How could he accept her poor assurance that what he believed was without foundation? She had offered no explanation, and could offer none!

One sole and only consolation was left her—her great sacrifice had secured Reginald's happiness. Would time, as it rolled on, preserve this for her—this one last solace? Ah! she thought that this at least would be granted to her saddened heart!

And as she thought thus, she entered her own grounds, keeping well out of view of the house by striking along a sequestered walk in the shrubbery, for she dreaded meeting visitors in her present mood.

Their guests were to leave the Abbey this afternoon; and it was well, thought Delia. Reginald, too, was leaving soon on a visit to Sir Crofton Earle, Fay's uncle, who had adopted her, and with whom she lived. Reginald and Fay were to be married at Easter, which fell early this year, and the bride-elect had her *trousseau* to order and her bridal to arrange. Thus, for a short time, Delia would be alone with Mrs. Ashley; but they were both to go to London soon, as Delia had not yet been presented at Court.

The chill winter wind was scarcely felt by Delia as she took her way through the shrubbery, for the cold at her own heart overpowered every other sensation.

She had paused a moment in her restless walk, when familiar tones struck her ear—those of her brother Reginald.

His back was toward Delia, and he stood in the most secluded nook of this retired part of the grounds, while—could she believe her senses?—he was completely absorbed in conversation with a very young girl (she looked barely fifteen), whose hand he was holding in his own.

Transfixed, Delia remained irresolute. Reginald—Reginald who was engaged to Fay—to be conversing with this village girl in secret! But perhaps he could explain this meeting, only it did appear so like a secret one out here, where he so rarely came. Fay, too, was to leave the Abbey to-day, and usually he grudged every moment passed away from her; and now, just when she was leaving, he was here! Perhaps business had called him to the spot. But what business could he have with this village girl?

"One thing I must impress on you. Whatever happens, I must see you again, and to-night. Oh, what agonies I shall suffer in the meantime!"

Had she heard aright? Was this her brother Reginald saying this?—her brother, so trusted and loved by her! If there were no explanation of this dreadful thing, better that she should lay down her head and die, and not struggle any more.

Reginald and the village girl still remained in earnest talk, but Delia heard nothing more; and as she stood spellbound, her young brother walked away slowly, the girl accompanying him, treading softly on the frozen grass. And thus the pair vanished from her sight.

It was necessary that Delia should rouse herself, for some of their visitors were to leave soon, Fay among the number, and she must be there to say good by to each.

And then—then she would lose not a moment in seeking Reginald, and entreating him, by their mutual love for one another, to tell her the truth.

He owed it to Fay, to every principle of right, to carry on no underhand correspondence with a girl such as the one she had seen.

Was it to be her dreadful fate to live to know that both her brothers could be dishonorable?

The bustle of approaching departure pervaded the Abbey as she reëntered it.

When she reached the drawing-room, Mrs. Ashley was standing near the fireplace with a disturbed countenance, and Fay was in tears.

No one else was in the room.

"I am so glad to see you, my dear Delia!" began Mrs. Ashley, in a voice of distress. "Do

come and try to comfort Favoretta, and explain things to us."

"What things?" asked Delia, herself wondering what had happened.

And turning to Fay, she said, "What has troubled you, dear Fay?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the young girl, trying hard not to seem too much overcome. "Mrs. Ashley must not make you suppose that anything astonishing has occurred, or that there is a reason for conjecturing some disaster, because your brother writes to bid me and all of us good-by, instead of seeing us himself. It seems, from his note to me, that he has had to leave the Abbey suddenly for London on business, so he writes his adieux, as time and trains wait for no man!"

"Is Reginald gone—to London, then?" stammered Delia.

"Yes, so it seems," replied Mrs. Ashley; while Fay, striving not to let her tears fall, was reading for the sixth or seventh time the few short words which had been written by her lover.

How cold they read!

Was it fancy or hard reality?

"DEAREST FAY:

"I am very unexpectedly called to London, and must not lose a train, so I have to write my adieu instead of speaking it. You will know I shall let you hear from me at the earliest possible moment.

"Yours ever,

REGINALD LARCH.

"P. S.—Entreat Mrs. Ashley to make all the excuses necessary to our guests for me. I did not foresee this hurried journey."

And that was all.

Yet she and he had parted—how fondly!—last night, her hand in his, and he had whispered a few words which thrilled her heart with joy.

"All his deepest happiness had been born since he first saw her dear face," he had said, in tones which to Fay had been as sweetest music.

Their hands had been locked together; "To live without her now would be impossible!" Reginald had breathed, soft and low, as he left his kiss on her fair cheek.

And this morning he had left her thus!

The few lines read cold and chill to the warm-hearted and loving girl, whose future bliss was all bound up in him.

Delia—who had so lately encountered her brother in the shrubbery—was altogether overwhelmed, and sat down without saying another word.

"Well, my dear," resumed Mrs. Ashley, "I don't know that there is any reason why you should be so much distressed about it. Reggy has not run away for good! But do you know anything of the *cause* of this sudden absence?"

"I?" stammered Delia. "No; nothing!"

"I thought it just possible that you might, my dear, considering that Lord Lindsay left us so suddenly. Oh, Delia, dear! I am so truly grieved that you cannot see Lord Lindsay's worth, and his devotion for you."

"But—but I did not send Lord Lindsay away! I did not tell him to leave the Abbey!" cried Delia, more distressed than before.

"Perhaps not, in so many words, Delia; but we could all see how he felt. Is Reginald gone away on *his* account, my dear?"

"Not that I know," replied Delia, faintly.

Her head swam with this new trouble.

Reginald was gone.

Where? Why?

But he was not gone; he was hiding in the shrubbery in order to escape observation, and to avoid the good-by to Fay.

"We need not all of us look as if we were going to a funeral, Delia," cried Fay, trying to laugh. "Reginald will write as soon as he gets to town, I suppose, both to you and to me. Well, I had better prepare for my own departure, and you are not to tell Reggy that we all sat round the fire and wept over his note."

"No, indeed!" cried Mrs. Ashley, brightening up, as she began to think that, after all, Reginald's sudden absence would be satisfactorily explained. "And oh, Delia! if you will think over matters, I am sure you will not refuse to recall that nice Lord Lindsay. Never have I valued any young man so much!"

"But, dear Mrs. Ashley, do not talk as if—as if I had refused him! He did not give me the opportunity, and I am persuaded that he never will."

"Because you have repelled him," said the elder lady, with a sigh.

Then other people came in, and Fay rose hastily, saying she must dress for her railway journey; and an hour afterward she took a

tearful adieu of Delia, and the latter found herself toward four o'clock that afternoon alone with Mrs. Ashley, the visitors gone.

Reginald absent—the great rooms untenanted save by herself and that quiet old lady.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

WHAT a hush in the storm which had raged about her so fiercely during the last few days!

How terrible, too, was the quiet, peopled with the remembrance of all that had come to her! And what was yet to come?

That she could not know, but threatening fears met her on every side.

The seemingly interminable hours of that day went by at length, and morning brought with it a short letter from Reginald.

"I may be detained here a few days," he wrote, "so that I shall hardly be able to get to Sir Crofton Earle's so soon as I had hoped. Of course I shall write to Fay."

This was all, and Delia felt renewed uneasiness.

A whole week rolled away; New Year's Day dawned and waned, and others succeeded it, while Mrs. Ashley pottered about in the garden, and drove out, and fell asleep in her easy-chair after dinner, and went through her easy existence, without discovering that Delia was changed—changed from a happy, careless, blooming girl, to a saddened, restless, care-laden one.

Delia had written to Reginald at his club, but it was impossible to write all she had to urge; and she could only tell him how much she hoped that he would manage a speedy return to the Abbey, as she had much to say to him of great import.

Then came a few more short lines from him, a hasty excuse for his absence, which really explained nothing.

The very next post brought something quite unexpected to Delia—a letter addressed to herself, in that same bold writing which had been on the envelope she had first taken in at the library window.

With shrinking heart, Delia opened it and read:

"I have fought against troubling you, Delia, but I was seized with serious illness on coming to London, which I did almost immediately after our last sight of each other. I should not like to die without a few last words. Will you not make some excuse to come to town, and grant the last prayer of J. L."

What could she do in answer to such an appeal? She must obey it; but how?

Mrs. Ashley was the dearest of old ladies, and fain would Delia have had the comfort of referring to her in this sad perplexity; but, alas! Mrs. Ashley could not keep a secret, and to confide in her would have been to trust the whole of their intimate acquaintances with the fact of James Larch's existence, and the necessity he had subjected himself to of evading the law.

Thus Delia saw herself forced to go on a false pretense.

"I want to run up to London and see what Reggy is doing," said she, inwardly trembling, as they parted for the night.

"To London!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashley, in much the same tone as she would have used if told that Delia meditated a journey to Lapland.

"To see Reginald," repeated Delia.

"Well, my dear, then I must make an effort to go! But at this time of year it certainly is not pleasant."

"Oh! I could not ask you to go," the girl hastened to say. "My maid would escort me, and Reginald—"

"Reginald would be at the other end to meet you? It might be managed in that way, certainly."

"That is the way in which we will manage it," said Delia, decidedly. "Good-night, dear Mrs. Ashley. I will be off by an early train tomorrow, then I shall get back sooner. So good-by, as well as good-night."

She spoke with concealed anxiety, for she did not intend to send Reginald a telegram to meet her at the other end of her journey. She would see him, truly, but not till she had first seen her other brother, James, whose bones were supposed to lie whitening on a North American prairie.

But now Delia experienced an embarrassment she had never felt before. She had no means for her journey and that of her maid, for she had given all her money to her elder brother, and to borrow of Mrs. Ashley would give rise to innumerable questions.

She solved the immediate difficulty by borrowing of her maid, on some excuse, and in the

cold fog and frostiness of an early morning in January, they started.

By nine o'clock they were well on their way to London; by eleven o'clock the shrinking girl and her attendant were at Victoria Station.

"Now, Marston, I want you to go on to our town-house, and wait for me. I will go to my brother alone."

"Alone, miss! But what would Mrs. Ashley say?" cried the maid, thunderstruck.

"I know that I must tell her afterward, Marston, but at present it is best to manage as I arrange. Besides, what possible harm can happen to me in a cab? Am I not going to see my own brother?"

"To be sure, miss," said Marston, who did not quite go the length of accusing Miss Larch of being about to visit a sweetheart.

So far, then, Delia's way was smooth—all except the awkward part of having no money with which to repay what she had borrowed of her maid when they returned to the Abbey.

Reginald and Mrs. Ashley had both known that she possessed fifty pounds untouched a few days previously; they had each laughed at her careful and thrifty habits of always having cash at command, and paying ready money for her personal expenses. How then was she to account for her present poverty, which sooner or later must leak out? For she had promised to give fifteen pounds to a poor family in the neighborhood of the Abbey, who had suffered great loss from fire, but that subscription she was now powerless to pay.

With these uncomfortable reflections in her mind, the rumbling cab brought her in less than half-an-hour to a quiet, somewhat poor, side street in Pimlico, where her brother James lodged.

An untidy maid-servant answered her summons, and Delia was as much surprised to behold such a person as the maid was at seeing so elegant a young lady as Miss Larch standing there inquiring for the gentleman, Mr. Roberts, who had lately come to live there.

"There ain't no one come here lately, miss; the gent as is here now has stayed on an' on for six year an' more. A stout party; old he is, but his name isn't Roberts—'tis Thomas."

"Are you sure?" asked Delia.

"La, yes, miss! 'Tisn't like I shouldn't know, for I've been here five year. I'm eighteen to-morrow, an' I came when I was thirteen."

"Is Mr. Thomas ill?" inquired Delia, thinking that there was some mistake.

"Ill? No; he's as well as you or me and that stout! There, miss, if you want a sight—"

But Delia had heard enough. She had come to the wrong address, that was plain; but she had come to the address given in her brother's letter.

"What shall I do now?" asked she of the rough-servant girl. "I came to London to see a sick friend; he may be dying. Surely this is Connington street, Pimlico?"

"Sure enough it is, miss, No. 117. No; you've made no mistake. Try at 17, and at 27, and 7, and see if you don't find the party you wants there. 'Tis the number you want, not the street."

And so Delia, in haste and trepidation (she had dismissed the cab), went to No. 27, and then to No. 17, and on to No. 7. But with no success. Mr. Roberts was not a lodger at any of those places.

She now determined to summon courage and knock at every house in Connington street till she came to the right one, and had twice made her weary inquiry, when an exclamation from a voice, which thrilled and terrified her at once, made her look round to meet the questioning eyes and sad face of Lord Lindsay Deane.

"Miss Larch! Delia! You here, alone?" he exclaimed. "Were you going anywhere near? Can I aid you?"

"No, thank you," replied Delia, trembling. "I am in great haste, Lord Lindsay, and must hurry on."

"How can I leave you here, unless your brother is with you, or some friend? Is it possible that Mrs. Ashley permitted you to come to town alone?"

"My maid escorted me, and Reginald is in London. I made the journey to see my brother."

"But he is not with you! I have just met him, and fear, from the hasty manner in which he left me, that he is in some anxiety."

"Indeed! But I must not delay. Excuse me, Lord Lindsay, but I must go on."

"Delia," said he, "I will not leave you in this out-of-the-way street unless with some responsible escort."

"Do I understand you to threaten to watch

my actions, Lord Lindsay?" cried Delia, completely dismayed.

"I have not threatened anything, but I will watch over your safety while you are here alone."

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried, bursting into tears; "and time is flying! Lord Lindsay, you do not understand the importance to me, and to a dying person, of every moment that is now passing away."

"Delia, you know my devotion to you. I will be as one blind or deaf. I will remain tongue-tied as to this interview, if you will permit me to be your escort. That is all I ask. Is it too much?"

"And is it too much to ask, on my part, that you leave me free—unfettered? Cannot you infer from what I have told you, that I came here on a charitable errand, to see a dying person? By prolonging this interview you are torturing me."

"You force me to leave you. But I will remain there at the corner of the street till you return. Remember, if you need a friend's help, there I am!"

"Lord Lindsay, you must not watch my actions. As I have already told you, I came here to see a dying person."

"Whom she loves!" he thought within himself. But, aloud, he said, "Go! I will not follow you!"

Then he walked some distance away, and she continued her search.

At last, at No. 11, which she did not reach until she had gone the weary length of one side of the street, she learnt that a Mr. Roberts did lodge there.

"And he is very ill?" asked Delia, now half fainting.

"Well, miss, he has been bad; but, to-day, bad as he's been, he said he must get up and go out. And out he did go, nigh on eleven o'clock."

"Gone out!" echoed Delia. "I supposed him dying! I have come a long journey on purpose to see him, and now you tell me he is gone out!"

"That he is, miss, and no mistake! And when he'll be back is more'n I know. You'd best step in."

"I can't wait," said Delia, feeling some indignation at her brother's thoughtlessness.

He could not be so very ill if he could rise and go out! And to what pain and suspicion had he not exposed her!

"Will you say, please, that a young lady came to see him—a lady named Delia; and that she had had such great trouble in coming she would not be able to call again, but that she was glad to find him better."

"La, yes, miss. He'll be sorry to have missed you, I'll be bound, but he said as he must go out."

With that, Delia walked away, and Lord Lindsay met her as she neared the corner of the street.

"I did not once look round. I know nothing of where you have been, Delia," said he, tenderly.

"And I," she said, faintly, "I did not find the person I came to see, and whom I believed to be dying. Lord Lindsay, from my heart I am sorry not to be able to tell you more. Are we not bound to guard another's secrets?"

"Sometimes," he answered. "At any rate, I will guard this secret of yours. But what is this? You are overcome with fatigue, or with what you have suffered! Let me get you a cab. Oh, that I am to lose sight of you like this! Delia, it will break my heart!"

"And mine!" escaped her lips, as if against her will.

"What do I hear? Oh, my own darling, did you tell me that our separation gave you pain—that it would break *your* heart also?"

"I said—I said that what I suffered would kill me," replied she, covered with confusion, and now only anxious to leave him.

But he held fast her hand.

"Delia, you cannot leave me till I know from your own lips what those two words meant. I see that you are unhappy; I have known it these few last dreadful days. But now I must be assured whether in what you suffer, any particle of that pain is caused by your separation from me. If so, never, never will I give up hope—never will I renounce you, Delia!" said he, passionately.

"Lord Lindsay," she faltered, "I entreat you to let me leave you now! It must be sufficient for you to know that I could never, never, at any time—"

She paused.

"Could never return my affection?" breathed he, in passionate, despairing tones.

Delia was silent. How could she tell this man he was nothing to her, when her heart danced to a joyous music, saddened as she was, by the remembrance that he loved her?

"You are silent, Delia," he repeated.

"I must leave you," she said, in helpless misery.

"You shall. But, dearest, I will not be slow in following you to the Abbey to ask you the question there."

"Oh, no, no!" she faltered. "There, too, and always, I must tell you the same thing—that we are separated!"

Lord Lindsay hailed a cab, put her into it, then following her, he bent and imprinted a fervent kiss on the hand he clasped for a moment.

And then he left her; and the cab which bore Delia away from his longing eyes a moment afterward, carried a despairing girl.

Was she not in reality bound by as heavy a chain as before? Was she one whit more free to accept Lindsay's love? Would she ever be—ever at any time?

Oh, no; for nothing could undo the fact that her brother James had committed forgery, and perhaps taken a man's life! That fact must remain a wall of adamant between her and Lindsay, even though her erring brother slept in ever so deep a grave. But yet, as the cab took her away from Lindsay's dear presence, a ray of consolation struck across her misery—a line of golden glory on the dark sea of her hopelessness.

Lindsay had repeated that he loved her. Would she ever forget that?

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEWS WHICH AWAITED DELIA.

"I THINK I have had my journey for nothing," said Delia, as, at length, her cab drew up at the town mansion, where her maid awaited her. "My brother was not to be found at his club. I made the cabman inquire for him."

"And he has not been here, ma'am; and you look so tired. Mrs. Mathews has got you some luncheon, ma'am, and some tea. If you are returning to the Abbey by the half past three o'clock train, we shall not have much time to spare."

Delia shivered by the blazing fire in the disused breakfast-room—shivered more even from excitement than from exhaustion. The outside world looked indescribably gloomy, for darkness was not far off that January day, and fog hung in the air and brooded over the city.

But despite the fog, and gloom, and her intense fatigue, the image of Lord Lindsay, his words and looks, recurred to support her.

Soon after, Delia and her maid drove off for Victoria Station, whence, some time before six o'clock, they neared Larch Abbey again.

"Mr. Larch may have returned before us, miss," said the maid, cheerily as the train stopped. "I shouldn't wonder now if he was here to meet you, miss."

Delia scanned the platform eagerly, and jumped out; but no tall, youthful form, with laughing eyes and joyful looks, met her gaze. She was only answered by the gloom and mournfulness of night.

A carriage had been sent to take her home; and Delia hoped that when she arrived, Mrs. Ashley would neither be too curious as to the manner in which she had spent her hours in London, nor too close in her questioning.

But she soon found that she would have nothing formidable in that way to encounter. Mrs. Ashley was in tears, and the greatest distress.

"Oh, my dear, I do not know how to tell you what has happened! I cannot find the words! It is too dreadful!"

And then came another burst of tears.

"Pray, do tell me, dear Mrs. Ashley—tell me at once, for suspense is hard to bear!"

"It is about poor Fay!" wept Mrs. Ashley.

"Is he ill?" cried Delia, in alarm.

"No, poor dear girl; unless she is ill from wretchedness! And only this morning I had a letter from her, telling me that Lady Catherine Barnes had promised to be her sixth bridesmaid; and then this blow falls!"

"Dear Mrs. Ashley, what is it?" implored Delia, sinking down at the old lady's feet, and seizing her hands.

"I don't know what Sir Crofton Earle will say; but you have been told what a furious temper he has. I shouldn't wonder if he took legal proceedings, Delia."

"Oh, tell me!" cried Delia, again—"tell me at once!"

"Well, my dear, I have as good as told you, now, and you must see that I wished to prepare

you for the sad truth. I don't understand what is done in such cases about wedding presents; but I am sure the pearl ear-drops Fay had from old Mrs. Vane must have cost three hundred pounds, at least. But what is losing them, or anything else, compared to losing her happiness? Your brother Reginald has jilted her, my dear!"

"It is not possible!" broke from Delia's lips.

"There is her letter, and Reginald's. Both came by the afternoon post. Read them, and see if there is any hope."

Delia sunk down on the nearest chair, overcome with this new trouble.

Reginald to jilt Fay! It did not seem possible.

She first opened poor Fay's letter, and read:

"DEAREST DELIA: I must call you so, for we were to have been sisters so soon! I am nearly blinded with tears as I write this. Reginald has sent me such a cruel letter! Yes, cruel: though in it he tells me he shall die with my image in his heart. He says, Delia, that he shall never marry; that it has become his duty to live and die a lonely man; that Mount's Castle and nearly all he possesses is mine by right, but that we two must live and die apart."

"How can he write such cruel words to me? How have I deserved them, Delia? My heart is broken. You can speak where I cannot. What would be to me a hundred castles without his love? His love!—if I have lost it, Delia, I must live without it—or die!"

"Oh, Delia! you are with him. You can question him. I cannot. He says that we are not to meet again. And I can only acquiesce in such a hard decision. Will you write to me, then? Will you find out for me what it is which has estranged him from me in these few short days? Ah! my heart misgave me when I left Larch Abbey, and he sent me that short, cold note of adieu."

"I know it is the fashion for girls to hide their feelings, and to be as ready to renounce a lover as he may be to forget them; but, Delia, we were affianced, and I, at least, cannot resign my life's happiness without asking why it is wrested from me. You are my only hope, then, Delia, and I think you will not fail."

Your heart-broken

"FAY EARLE."

"And here is Reginald's letter, my dear," said Mrs. Ashley, beginning to weep anew, and watching Delia's pale face as she read:

Reginald's letter ran thus:

"MY DEAR MRS. ASHLEY: A great sorrow has blighted my life, a sorrow which I cannot explain. I no longer look forward to a happy marriage with Fay, and have written to tell her so."

"It is not possible, in my present frame of mind, that I should come back to the Abbey, save for one or two days; but I find that I cannot leave England for a lengthened period without a business interview with the steward, and settling some things which hitherto I have arranged for Delia since her guardian's death."

"During this time, I must not be questioned. I can explain nothing, and only useless pain to us all could result from questions concerning my motives for breaking off my engagement to Fay and going abroad."

"You will forgive me, I hope, for writing abruptly, for I feel acutely the change in my so recent happy prospects."

"Give my sister the inclosed note. She will grieve, I fear, for this sudden alteration in our plans."

I am ever, dear Mrs. Ashley,

Yours affectionately,

"REGINALD LARCH."

"He is in great haste to fly from us all, my dear; but something ought to be done to prevent the ruin of the happiness of two lives. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, that we could see what to do!" gasped Delia.

"There is still his letter to you to read, Delia."

It was as follows:

"MY DEAR DELIA: I write to you at a solemn moment of my life—at an hour when everything like happiness is wrenched from me. Therefore, I think you will consent to give consideration to my words. Lately I have fancied that you and Lindsay Deane were drifting apart. Do not let any idle fancy or girlish readiness to be exacting make you foolish enough to slight his love. He is a good fellow, and you will not now have me to watch over you."

"Oh, Delia! it is a cruel blow which has struck me, all the more so because I could neither foresee nor ward it off."

"We shall meet only to separate; they will have told you that. Do not make our parting more bitter than it must be by useless entreaties."

Your ever-loving brother,

"REGINALD."

"And what does he say to you, Delia? Does he speak out to you?"

"Not at all. Dear Mrs. Ashley, you must not repeat what he says here to me, and I am reluctant to show you; but if I do not, you will suppose there is some secret."

"Yes, that I shall, my dear; and be so uneasy."

"Well, then, he advises me to accept Lord Lindsay Deane," added Delia, with a vivid

blush; "but as I cannot accept him, we will say no more about it."

Mrs. Ashley, however, did say a great deal more about it; for great was her desire to see Delia Lady Lindsay Deane.

"I do not see what there is to be done in this sad business—do you, Delia? Shall we send for Lord Lindsay to speak to Reginald when he arrives? He might listen to him."

"Impossible! Oh, no, no, dear Mrs. Ashley!" cried Delia. "Wait; let me think a moment! I want to think!"

Delia rose from her chair restlessly, and as she paced about the room, was debating whether she should send a telegram to her aunt, Lady Wood, now in the south of France, to acquaint her with the state of things, and beg her to return home at once; for Reginald had declared he would answer no questions; but this aunt had much influence with him, and he gave her all the affection of a son.

"Let us send a telegram to aunt Wood. He may listen to her!" cried Delia, stopping in her hurried walk.

"The very thing, my dear! Oh, what comfort the thought has given me! Tell her she must come straight to the Abbey, and travel almost without a break."

"She will have time to get here, for Reginald writes as if he should not arrive for a day or two, and he will be detained here another two or three days, he says."

Much comforted by this sending of the telegram, Mrs. Ashley prepared to eat her dinner, and to hope that all would yet be well. But Delia could take rest only because exhaustion laid on her its heavy hand, and no dreams of a sunny future for her or for Reginald visited her heavy slumbers that bitter night.

CHAPTER X.

DELIA HAS TO ANSWER SOME DIFFICULT QUESTIONS.

THE next twenty-four hours had not run their course when Reginald arrived at the Abbey. He came in unannounced, greeting his sister and Mrs. Ashley in his usual manner. But his features seemed cut in stone, and no smile broke across them; nor did any ray of gladness shine from eyes that were once all mirth and brightness.

Delia and Mrs. Ashley kissed him in silence, each beginning to calculate how far on her way to the Abbey Lady Wood might be.

The short sentences exchanged between the two ladies and Reginald were constrained and few.

"Had you a cold journey, Reginald?" asked Mrs. Ashley.

"I think so; I did not observe," replied he.

Delia could not venture on a remark, for her voice was choked with tears.

Reginald sat down, and hastily opened some letters awaiting him; then rose, and left the room, merely asking if dinner could be deferred till eight o'clock.

"Oh, Delia, I am more concerned than ever now that I have seen him!" cried Mrs. Ashley, as the door closed behind him.

So was Delia. But with the evening letters had arrived an unwelcome one for her. She had recognized the handwriting of her brother James.

"It is not possible to tell you, Delia," wrote he, "how much I feel your kindness in coming to see me; and you may rest assured that no common occurrence forced me to be absent when you arrived. Ill as I was, I had to leave my sick-bed that morning, for, Delia, I may have to fly from England, and suddenly."

In this case, I must see you once more, as there is yet something to confide to you, of which you are at present ignorant. But I could not ask you to run the risk of another journey to London. I will come (it will be for the last time) to the library window, and I must not venture so close as early in the evening as before."

"When I last wrote to you, I believed myself dying; but my partial recovery was as rapid as my attack. When we meet I will explain fully and clearly."

"If I have to leave England at once, can you be prepared to advance funds for that purpose? I shall want at least a hundred pounds—it should be more; and how many thousands a year has my brother Reginald!—how many thousands will you have! While I, the heir to all—I have to petition for a pitance! But do not think I say this to reproach you, my good, my dear sister! I reproach myself; but would it be in human nature not to feel bitterly?"

Yours, most unhappy, J. LARCH."

This further communication sorely embarrassed Delia. To have forthcoming a hundred pounds at a moment's notice was well-nigh impossible to her; besides which, she owed her maid five pounds, and every day expected to be asked for the fifteen guineas which in a hap-

pier time she had promised to the family whose cottage had been burned.

It is true she had much valuable jewelry; but if she disposed of that, she would inevitably be questioned at a future time. How should she answer such questions? But yet it was true that there were thousands spent at Larch Abbey which would have belonged of right to him who now petitioned for a hundred!

The receipt of this letter by no means tended to calm her agitation as she went down-stairs to meet Reginald; and even he, absorbed as he was in his own griefs, exclaimed, at the sight of her:

"You are not well, Delia, or else you are very unhappy!" said he.

"I am not very happy, but never mind that," replied she, turning away from his scrutiny.

Reginald said no more, attributing her altered looks to sorrow for his sudden departure, and still more to some coldness or misunderstanding with Lord Lindsay.

"Don't throw away your happiness, Delia," said he, gloomily.

"No," she answered, in low accents of deep feeling; "but happiness may be torn from us."

"That is true, indeed!" said he, bitterly, and then was silent. Delia had hoped he would connect what she had said with the sorrow she must feel at his severance from Fay, and his sudden mysterious leave-taking. Indirectly she must entreat him, if in no other manner.

The dinner was heavy beyond endurance. Reginald ate nothing, and when he uttered a few words, forgot sometimes to finish his sentence.

Toward the conclusion of the meal, when the servants had withdrawn, he addressed Delia suddenly:

"We must not forget those poor Johnstones, who were burnt out. How much did you say you would give them, Delia? That must be done at once."

"I said I would give fifteen guineas," faltered Delia, a troubled flush mounting to her brow.

"Will you let them go with my subscription, and give them to me to-night?"

Delia's confusion increased.

"Suppose you get the money as soon as you go up-stairs?" continued Reginald, gloomily.

Then, as still she did not reply, he looked at his sister. Her distress was evident.

"Reginald, I have not the money; I want some very badly just now," stammered she.

"Want some!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashley.

"Why, my dear, you had fifty pounds a fortnight ago, and you are always so careful!"

"Yes, yes—but," said Delia, "I have spent it."

"How?" asked Reginald, shortly.

"I—I gave it away," said Delia, still more confused than before.

"And to whom?" questioned her brother, sternly, with the feeling that some one had been getting a large sum from his inexperienced sister, and that he must put her on her guard.

"I gave it in charity," said Delia, trembling.

"Indiscriminate charity creates paupers, I have heard it said," remarked Mrs. Ashley in the pause which followed.

"Who has been imposing on you, Delia?" asked Reginald, with a weary sigh.

"I gave it willingly, and feel that I did right in doing so; but, Reginald, when I went to London to see you yesterday, I had no money, and it was so embarrassing! I had to borrow five pounds of Marston."

"And you owe these fifteen guineas to the Johnstones, because you promised them the money?"

"Yes," said Delia, feeling very uncomfortable.

"Well, Delia, you will get into trouble—and serious trouble—if you spend beforehand what you have made yourself liable for, and borrow for exigencies. If you go upon that principle, you will get into difficulties, heiress as you are."

"I hope I can have some money now, Reggy, because I really do want it. Can you let me have two hundred pounds?" asked she.

"Two hundred! Why?" questioned Reginald, who felt sure that the money was not to be spent on herself.

"Yes, please; I want as much as two hundred."

"Delia, you shall have it, if you will tell me how you spent the fifty pounds."

Tell him that? Why, that would be to tell him all!

"I cannot. I have promised not. It was in charity," faltered Delia.

"Well, then, Delia, for your sake, I refuse. I am sure some one is imposing on your generosity, and I will stop it at once. Of

course it is right that you should give; but to be bound not to tell your nearest relatives how you dispose of your money is not right. You are only eighteen, Delia, and three hundred a-year ought to be enough for your present wants, when those wants mean merely dress and small charities. How are you to manage the outgoing which this large estate entails if you cannot keep within bounds on three hundred a-year, when all your needful expenses are paid?"

"It is painful to me not to tell you, Reggy; but I have promised to be silent, and I cannot—I ought not to speak of this gift. You yourself would say that I ought not to do so," cried she.

"Perhaps you have been made to think so. However, let us say no more about it, Delia. I confess that it has made me rather anxious."

"And now, pray, let me have the two hundred pounds," urged Delia, with tears in her eyes.

"It must be one hundred," said Reginald, decisively. "That will surely allow a comfortable margin, even when you have paid the twenty pounds owing to your maid and to the Johnstones."

"No, it will not do what I want, indeed," cried Delia, who asked herself how she should find the hundred pounds needed by that unknown brother, who might ask for it even by to-morrow's post.

But Reginald was inflexible. Moreover, Delia's unusual persistency, and her deep disappointment at his refusal of the money, gave him an uneasy feeling. Mrs. Ashley, too, was as much surprised as Reginald; but she forbore to add her remarks to Delia's distress.

"Since I cannot get the money, I must let my jewels go," decided Delia. "I shall be suspected, and I cannot explain."

They rose from table, and Reginald did not follow them into the drawing-room.

When ten o'clock struck, a footman brought in a note to Mrs. Ashley. That kind old lady read with some satisfaction these lines from Reginald:

"I forgot to tell you that Lindsay Deane will be here to dine and sleep to-morrow evening. He met me, and asked to come. Better not tell Delia."

Mrs. Ashley made no comment on the note, and soon afterward Delia said "Good-night," and left the room.

CHAPTER XL.

THE CLIMAX.

"How ill Reggy is!" smote through Delia's heart, as she met her brother at the morning meal.

Daylight showed, even more clearly than had the previous night, his haggard looks; and he was thus changed in a few short days. What, then, would a few months do?

As this thought pressed on the young girl, Reginald was taking a long and furtive gaze at his sister.

She was not wont to look as she did this morning.

As he noted this, he observed that a painful expression crossed her face as she took up a letter awaiting her—a letter which she hastened to put into her pocket, unread.

"If she accepts Lindsay, she will be in his keeping, and I need not be anxious. If not, I must question her," he decided.

"I shall be occupied all day," he remarked to Mrs. Ashley. "But I will see you and Delia at dinner. I shall probably leave by the night train to-morrow."

"To-morrow! And suppose Lady Wood did not arrive till he was gone! That was the thought in the hearts of both ladies as they looked silently at each other, while Reginald left the room.

"My one hope is that she will come in time," said Mrs. Ashley, breaking silence.

"And mine," added Delia.

And then she slipped away to read that letter which lay concealed—a source of infinite anxiety—in her pocket.

That anxiety was by no means allayed as she read:

"As I feared, I must leave this country, and I will come to-night for the two hundred pounds. Oh, Delia! make it a larger sum, if possible. Do I give you trouble? Well, it will be for the last time, and our interview will be of the shortest.

"You will give me the money, and I will let you have the address to which, henceforward, you may transmit my allowance abroad.

"There is one thing more; but all my hopes hang

on it for even I have hopes, Delia. I want to hear from your own lips that if I die, you will continue to my child—for I have a child, Delia—the allowance you send me. When I have that assurance, I will depart, and trouble you no more, forever.

"We must not meet at the same hour as before; but come to the same place—the library window—soon after the household have retired to rest.

"Two moments will end our interview; and even should you be heard in remounting the stairs, how easily could you account for your presence in the library! It would be only to carry a book with you, and to say that you could not sleep.

"I shall count on you, then—to-morrow, soon after midnight. Your ever unhappy brother
"J. L."

Shaken as she had been, the idea of meeting him alone, so late, was intensely terrifying to Delia, and nothing would have made her consent but the belief which had taken possession of her that he had in some way been traced, and must fly, and had not the means to do so.

But the money! Delia was desperate.

She collected most of her valuable bracelets, a jeweled pendant, earrings, and a diamond locket, and putting them into a small basket, locked them in one of her drawers, ready for transport.

The day wore on.

Contrary to the expectation of Delia and Mrs. Ashley, Reginald came into the drawing-room toward five o'clock and asked for some tea. Just then a ring at the hall door announced a visitor.

"Lindsay Deane, I suppose," remarked Reginald, carelessly. "Did I tell you, Delia, that he begged to come here to see me to-night?"

"No," said she, faintly.

But it was not Lindsay Deane who entered. It was the secretly longed-for aunt, Lady Wood.

"Is it you, aunt? I did not think you intended returning before the spring!" exclaimed Reginald, in astonishment.

"I altered my plans lately, my dear boy," said she, kissing him affectionately, and taking no apparent notice either of his altered looks or of Delia's. "Oh, how nice to be here, after my cold, long journey! You expect another visitor, I imagine; for a fly was rumbling after mine all up the drive."

"Lord Lindsay Deane!" said Mrs. Ashley.

Yes, it was he, indeed; and Delia changed color more than once as he took her hand in greeting.

Thanks to these arrivals, the dinner to-night was not quite so dreary as on the day before, though even now Reginald was almost silent, and Delia too wretched to do more than go through the meal in dumb show.

"Shall you speak to Reginald to-night?" cried Mrs. Ashley, the moment she was alone with Lady Wood.

"Yes; to-night! But say nothing about it, not even to Delia."

It was late when they left the dining room; for Lady Wood had talked on about the South of France, and Lord Lindsay had kept up the conversation; so that no stranger would have suspected that under the assumed ease, the hearts of all gathered around the dinner-table were torn with sharp anxiety.

How deep, in Delia's case, could not be estimated; and, surely, Reginald's must be as heavy as hers, to make him thus leave his promised bride, and all the joys which youth and wealth offered him. Delia retired early.

She wished to do nothing to encourage Lindsay's suit; while, on his side, he as steadfastly resolved to speak to her the moment she left the breakfast room next morning.

By midnight, deep silence reigned throughout the Abbey. It was very still for a winter night; not even the moaning and sighing of the wind broke the quiet.

The unhappy Delia, pale as the whitest flower in her own beautiful conservatory, took up the basket laden with trinkets, and with noiseless footfall proceeded along the carpeted corridors, and down the wide staircase.

She gained the library door.

Another ten minutes, and her ordeal would be over, and she would breathe again.

Now she caught her breath at each instant, trembling as she went.

But here she was at the door, a door which rolled back softly on its hinges, and made no sound to afflict the terrified intruder. If the window would open as softly, surely no one would be disturbed—no one!

There were other watchers besides Delia that night in the old Abbey, for Mrs. Ashley and Lady Wood held anxious converse together, waiting till Reginald should leave Lindsay Deane.

The two young men were still talking in a room below, for sleep was far from either of them, and Lindsay had much to say.

"I must be ready to waylay him," said Lady Wood, listening above for the sound of the opening door.

To her amazement, she saw Delia appear at the head of the staircase—Delia, who hesitated, as if in dread, and then crept tremblingly down-stairs.

Something in the girl's aspect made both Lady Wood and Mrs. Ashley instantaneously decide to follow, and they went after her swiftly, with cautious tread.

Delia alone carried a taper, a little star of light amid the surrounding darkness. She went to the door of the library, set down her precious basket with intense care, in order to avoid making any noise, and opened the great door; but not before Lady Wood, who had got near her and was then standing in a little recess, had caught plain view of what Delia carried—a number of jewel cases.

Could she mean flight?

Lady Wood trembled almost as much as Delia as the latter opened the door.

"Bring Reginald!" she whispered to Mrs. Ashley, when Delia had closed the door and vanished.

Lord Lindsay and the unhappy Reginald were standing on the hearth-rug in the smoking-room, when their conference was suddenly broken in upon by the appearance of the frightened Mrs. Ashley, who was impressed by the necessity of giving Delia no alarm, and yet that their action should be prompt.

"Come!—come!" she whispered; "Delia is in danger!" And that was all she said.

But it was enough. They noiselessly followed the agitated Mrs. Ashley to the library door.

Meantime, Lady Wood had turned the handle ever so softly, and was listening intently. Delia was at the long window which gave egress to the gardens. Now she was opening the shutter, as carefully as if life itself depended on it; but despite her greatest effort to unbar the fastening without noise, her fingers trembled too much to compass that entirely; and under cover of the slight disturbance caused by the opening of the shutter Lady Wood herself (shrouded in the darkness) passed quite into the room, and Lindsay Deane was quick to take up his station next her.

Delia had set down the wax taper she carried on the chimney-piece, far from the window, lest the night wind should extinguish it, and the feeble light it diffused through the lofty room was only sufficient to show the movements of the agitated girl; the further end of the apartment, and all the sides and corners, were in deepest gloom.

One terrible thought assailed the four watchers—Delia was about to fly with some stranger! Her changed looks, her manifest unhappiness, were too sadly accounted for now. But each said the same thing in the silent recesses of the heart—"We will save her!"

Hush! hush! The night wind rushes in as the long glass window yields to Delia's efforts and a man steps into the room. Haggard he is, altered even from the man he was when he first came to that same window, bearing with him the wreck of a young life's happiness.

"Delia," he whispered, in hoarse accents, "here is the paper which will tell you where to send all future sums of money."

"And here," gasped Delia, half-dead with fear, "here are these jewels, in place of the hundred pounds. I tried hard, but Reginald refused me the money. These are worth many hundred—take them—I can do no more!"

"Oh, Delia! how shall I change them for money without risk? But thanks—thanks, Delia! Now swear to me that you will continue to my child the allowance you will secure to me the moment you are of age—swear it, and I will go and leave you in peace!"

Who was this man who exacted such a promise from the guarded heiress of Larch Abbey? Who was this who addressed her as *Delia*—for whom she was ready to dare and to sacrifice so much? He looked almost old enough to be her father. Who could he be?

These questionings ran swiftly through the minds of Lady Wood, of Mrs. Ashley and of Lord Lindsay Deane; but the mind of Reginald was tossed on a strange, wild sea of doubt. He thought he guessed who this man was; and yet—and yet he had been told a deceitful tale if his surmises were true!

Delia's trembling lips gave the required promise.

"Now I shall leave you forever! Think

sometimes of your wretched, exiled brother. Oh! if my father could see me now, here in the old place, which I have only dared to enter in secret, from whence I go out a lonely, banished man!"

"Hush!—you will be discovered! Was that a noise?" panted Delia.

"No, no! There is only the night-wind to witness the last parting between an only sister and a brother supposed to have been eight years in his lonely grave. Let Reginald die without the knowledge that I am alive, I charge you, Delia! Now I am gone!"

But, as he turned to go, a woman stood between him and the way of exit, while Lord Lindsay (for Reginald seemed paralyzed) quickly seized the intruder, who, struck dumb by this unexpected presence of witnesses, was powerless. As for Delia, she uttered one faint exclamation, and sunk upon a chair.

"And now may I ask you, sir," exclaimed Lady Wood, towering in fine scorn before the man, "may I ask you who I am? I have heard, we have all heard, whom you profess to be—Mr. James Larch, who died many years since."

The man was speechless.

"Who am I, sir?" repeated Lady Wood, in severe tones.

"Aunt," said Reginald, hoarsely, "he—he has proved to me who he is—my brother James! But he has cruelly deceived me. He urged me not to let Delia know of his existence, that he might not blight her happiness."

"Oh, that was what he impressed on me with regard to you, dear Reggy," exclaimed Delia. "Dear aunt! Mrs. Ashley! Lord Lindsay! be silent about this secret which you have surprised, for this man is my brother, though he dares not openly avow it, for—for he has offended against the law!"

"I must express my astonishment," continued Lady Wood, with the same scorn as before, "that Mr. James Larch should not remember his old aunt Julia! Surely, sir, you can recall the name of Featherly? If you are James Larch, you will remember Featherly Hall, and your cousins and myself, who welcomed you there so often."

"Oh, aunt Julia, I do—I do remember!" exclaimed the intruder. "But nineteen years is a long time. I may be pardoned a momentary forgetfulness."

"That is true," she answered. "If you remember the old times, you have a better chance of making me believe your identity. Are you in trouble, then? But I am a woman of expedients. I will keep you safe at Featherly Hall. My nephew James shall be safe as long as I live to protect him."

"Aunt Julia, you are too good to me!" murmured the man, of whom Lindsay now relaxed his hold.

But neither the latter, nor Reginald, nor Mrs. Ashley, nor Delia, had ever heard of a Featherly Hall before, and they knew that no Mrs. Featherly was aunt to the Larch family, and that the lady who now called herself so was certainly Lady Wood, and that her Christian name was Mary, not Julia. Thus it flashed upon them all that she was testing the veracity of the intruder.

"Well, now let me inform you, my unknown nephew, that there is no such place as Featherly Hall; that you never saw me before, nor I myself; that if you had been the veritable James Larch, I should instantly have recognized you, notwithstanding the lapse of years—(not so long a space as you suppose, though)—for he and I met in New York the very year he died. You are not of my nephew's build, sir; and his old nurse, Deborah, and the elderly vicar of this parish, and the head gardener will testify to your imposture as well as I! We shall have numerous witnesses. You are doubtless a very clever rogue to have imposed on my real nephew and niece, and the means you have used for that purpose we shall see presently."

"What!" cried Reginald, raising his head, while the light of his former self flashed back again. "Have Delia and I been deceived? Is this man nothing to us? Oh, he has told us a specious tale! He brought me letters, old letters of my father's, old letters of yours, also, aunt Mary. And he said that he had committed forgery, and stabbed a man, and so was glad to let the world believe him dead, for that he was stung by remorse, dishonored, and in the power of the law. And I—I was mad with grief, for this is what has separated me from Fay! Could I let her wed the brother of a criminal, one who might stand in a felon's dock any day if discovered?"

"Oh, Reginald," faltered Delia, the life-blood

rushing back to her heart, "you and I have been deceived in precisely the same manner."

"My dear, unhappy children!" cried Lady Wood.

The late Mr. James Larch, utterly cowed and crestfallen, could not ejaculate one word in his own defense.

Reginald, restored to himself, quietly took Lindsay's place by the impostor, and then the young nobleman hastened to Delia's side.

"Has this cruel story influenced you in sending me from you?" he whispered. "Is it this which has made you reason as Reginald did?"

"I believed myself the sister of a felon, you know," she whispered back again, as she yielded her fingers to his clasp.

"Well," continued Lady Wood, turning again to the wretched man, "I think you will be puzzled, clever rogue as you are, to answer some questions which will shortly be put to you in a court of justice. We will see that you do answer them, or receive the reward you merit."

"Stay, madam," cried he. "I have a young daughter. Have some pity for my child. She is but fifteen. I sent her to negotiate with Mr. Reginald Larch. She personated his young and friendless niece."

Delia gave a start of joyful surprise, for all was explained now.

"She bore my credentials to him, and he supposed me abroad, for I preferred to deal with the young lady personally, as likely to be more credulous than her brother. His supposed niece, who had been born abroad, and had but just arrived in England, whither I had sent her as a last hope to appeal for funds to my only brother, could not be questioned about things she remembered, for, you see, she could not be expected to know anything about them. Well, I am a rogue, it is true; but I am also a father. Spare me, let me go free this night for my young daughter's sake!"

"How did you get the letters belonging to my late brother?" asked Reginald, sternly.

"Well, I was often employed by the real Mr. James Larch in America. You see that I am an educated man, gone to the bad; but I am no man-slayer, as I pretended to be, for my own purposes. That I put in to furnish a motive for refusing to claim a large property. I intended, and nearly succeeded, too, in getting a provision from both parties interested; but my own recklessness, or rather want of funds to fly on a sudden emergency, has provided for me in a way I did not anticipate."

"Well, I was saying that I was an educated man. Mr. Larch was fond of talking about his old home in England, and I, who never let an opportunity slip, questioned him carefully, at first merely with the intention of calling on his rich relatives in England as a friend, personating the gentleman, and making what I could of it, as chance might direct, if circumstances brought me to this country. Afterward, when he died so unexpectedly, and when I read, years after, in the English papers of the death of his father, this scheme matured itself, slowly indeed, but I acted on it at last. You see, I knew that his rich heiress-sister, and his equally wealthy young brother, had never seen enough of him to remember him, and I had got the letters. Poor Mr. Larch had charged me often to let his family have his papers in case he died out in the Far West; and I secured them, in the first place, with the intention of using them as a valuable introduction; but I am a dilatory man, and then this scheme dawned upon me. I have told you all, now!"

And, as he ended, in one moment, by a sharp turn, he had opened the window behind him, and stumbled out into the night. They pursued, but the darkness aided the pursued one, and after a fruitless chase they gave up the effort.

"You should inform the police authorities," said Lord Lindsay, as the two young men returned to the Abbey.

"Oh, Lindsay," exclaimed Reginald, linking his arm in that of his friend, "I am like a new man. Don't think I can sleep here to-night. Come; I shall rouse up a groom and ride till dawn; for, till I have seen Fay, I can neither rest nor sleep. So you will send to the police station for me, eh, old fellow?"

The two young men entered the stables together, roused up the groom, and soon afterward Reginald Larch went riding through the winter night to Sir Crofton Earle's.

The servant, who was first awake at Sir Crofton's Manor House, was amazed to see young Mr. Larch ride into the stable-yard. Right glad was he to seek the ample kitchen and warm himself by the fire, and from that stand-

point he sent up a message to Miss Favorette Earle, that he had ridden all night to see her. "Mr. Larch, did you say?" asked Fay, faintly. "Yes, Miss Fay; and he does look so tired, and so happy."

Fay, with new life, sprung up, and was soon attired, and long before Sir Crofton Earle (who had sworn that Reginald should never cross his threshold again, and that he, Sir Crofton, would ruin him)—well, long before the testy baronet came down, or even knew of the turn affairs had taken, Fay and Reginald were laughing together over a comfortable breakfast in Sir Crofton's dining-room.

But this was a good three hours after Reginald's arrival, for Fay's first meeting with him she had believed lost to her forever was with no laughter, but with the deepest, most pathetic feeling.

And Delia? What was she doing at the hour when Fay and Reginald had reached well-assured happiness? Surely Delia claims our chief attention, for we have journeyed oftenest in her company in the course of this recital.

We find her now at the window of a small saloon which overlooks the Abbey park and grounds, with Lindsay by her side. The misty sun has struggled into sight persistently through many folds of dark gray cloud, and as his rays break over the landscape, a sudden glory lights up the scene.

"See, Lindsay," says Delia, speaking very soft and low, "that lovely light through the gloom is an emblem of my past days of sorrow. But the night has gone, and happiness has conquered the clouds of grief which hung over me. I will forget the bitter past, that dreadful day when I went to London, and all the rest!"

"But you will forgive me if I can never forget that day," he says, tenderly, as his arm encircles her. "You must not ask me to forget that enchanting moment when, after all my despair, and I had told you that my heart would break to live without you, those two sweet words, 'And mine,' fell, unconsciously, from your lips."

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